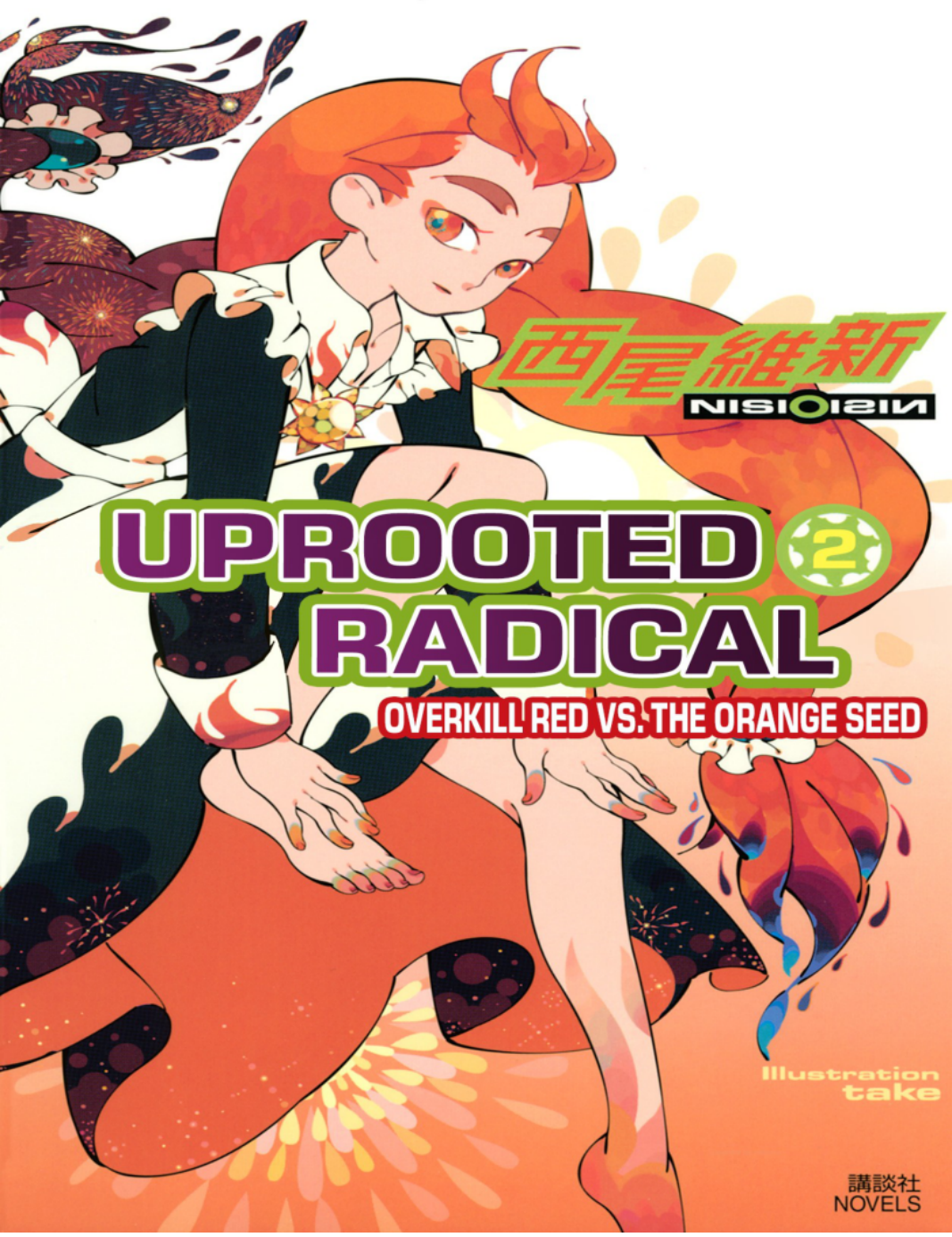
西尾維新
NISIOISIN
UPROOTED 2
RADICAL
OVERKILL RED VS. THE ORANGE SEED
Illustration
take
講談社
NOVELS

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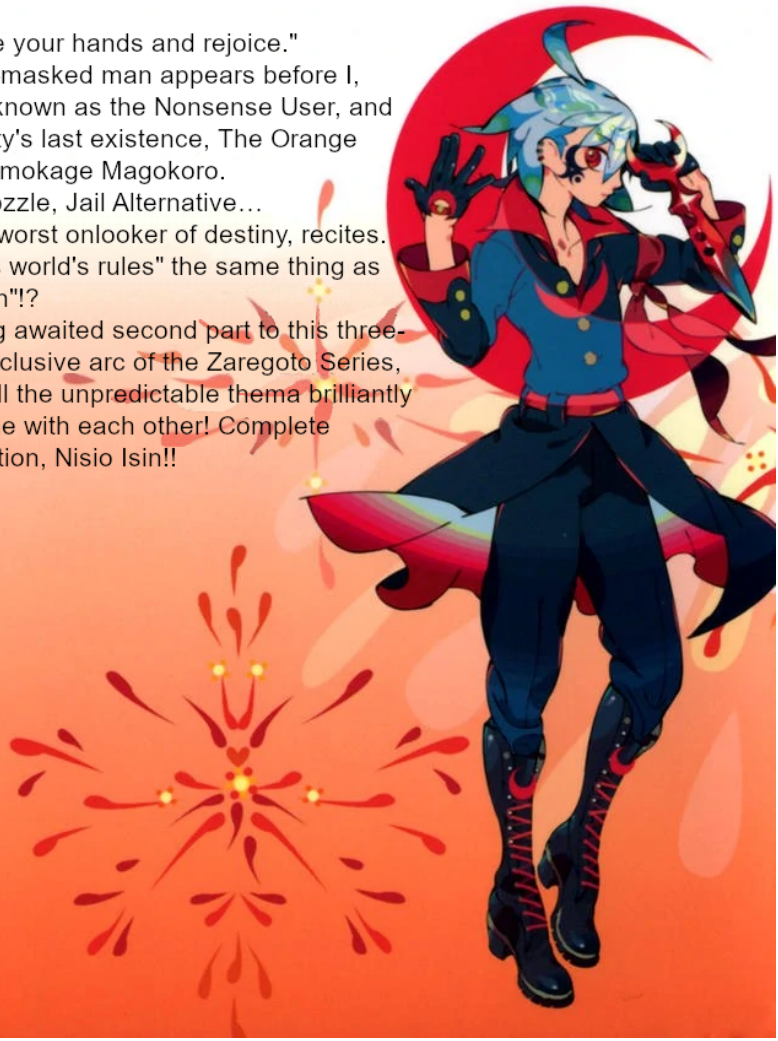
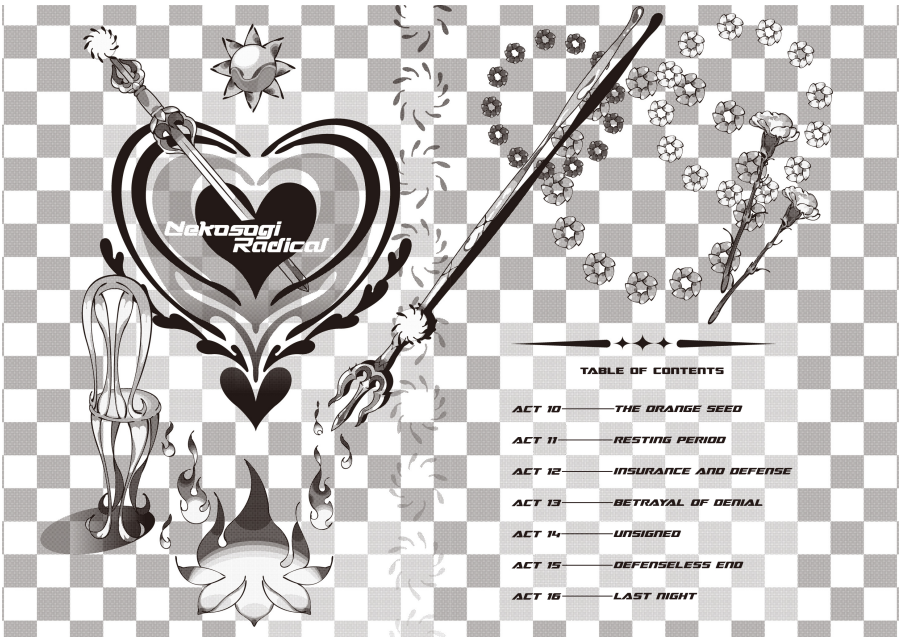
Nekosogi Radical (Second) Overkill
Red vs. The Orange Seed
Nisio Isin

Price: Physical 1080 yen (tax included)

"—Raise your hands and rejoice."
The fox-masked man appears before I, otherly known as the Nonsense User, and Humanity's last existence, The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro.
Back Nozzle, Jail Alternative…
He, the worst onlooker of destiny, recites.
Are "this world's rules" the same thing as the "truth"!?
The long awaited second part to this three-part conclusive arc of the Zaregoto Series, where all the unpredictable thema brilliantly intertwine with each other! Complete combustion, Nisio Isin!!





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CAST OF CHARACTERS

AKAGAMII IRIA	LADY
HANDA REI	HEAD MAID
CHIGA AKARI	ELDEST CHILD OF THE TRIPLET MAIDS
CHIGA HIKARI	MIDDLE CHILD OF THE TRIPLET MAIDS
CHIGA TERUKO	YOUNGEST CHILD OF THE TRIPLET MAIDS
IBUKI KANAMI	ARTIST
SASHIRONO YAYOI	COOK
HIMENA MAKI	FORTUNE-TELLER
SONOYAMA AKANE	ACADEMIC
SAKAKI SHINYA	ATTENDANT
ATEMIYA MUIMI	STUDENT
USAMI AKIHARU	STUDENT
EMOTO TOMOE	STUDENT
ADII MIKOKO	STUDENT
SASA SASAKI	DETECTIVE
IKARUGA KAZUHITO	DETECTIVE
SHISEI YUMA	ZIG ZAG
HAGIHARA SHIOGI	STRATEGIST
SAIJOU TAMAMO	INSATIABLE
ORIGAMI NOA	DIRECTOR
SHADOU KYOUICHIROU	RESEARCHER
OOGAKI SHITO	ASSISTANT
UZE MISACHI	SECRETARY
KOUTARI HINAYOSHI	RESEARCHER
NEO FURUARA	RESEARCHER
MIYOSHI KOKOROMI	RESEARCHER
KASUGAI KASUGA	RESEARCHER
UTSURIGI GAISUKE	GREEN GREEN GREEN
HINEMOSU SUZU	DOUBLE FLICK
GOTOODROKI SEIGO	REVERSE CROSS
MUNEFUYU MUTSUKI	CUBIC LOOP
NAOEKIRI HAKURAKU	DANCING WITH MADNESS
AYAMINAMI HYOU	CHEETAH
SHIKIGISHI KISHIKI	BAD KING
SHIGAI TOUNO	TRIGGER HAPPY-END
KIGAMINE YAKU	ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
MADOKA KUCHIHA	EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECT
NIOUNOMIYA IZUMU	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NIOUNOMIYA RIZUMU	GREAT DETECTIVE
ASANO MIIKO	SWORDSWOMAN
YUKARIKI ICHIHIME	GIRL
YAMIGUCHI HOUKO	GIRL
ISHINAGI MOETA	GRIM REAPER
HAYABUSA KOUTOUMARU	DJ
NANANANAMI NANAMI	WITCH
ISHIMARU KOUTA	GREAT THIEF
ZEROZAKI HITOSHIKI	DEMONIC KILLER
KAJOU AKIRA	SECOND
ICHIRIZUKA KONOMI	SPACE CREATOR
EMOTO SONOKI	DOCTOR
UTAGE KUDAN	AERIAL WEAPON
FURUYARI ZUKIN	SWORDSMITH
TOKINOMIYA JIKOKU	THOUGHT MANIPULATOR
MIGISHITA RURERO	PUPPETEER
YAMIGUCHI NUREGINU	ASSASSIN
MIOTSUKUSHI MISORA	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
MIOTSUKUSHI TAKAMI	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NOISE	DISSONANCE
KINO RAICHI	POISON USER
OMOKAGE MAGOKORO	ORANGE SEED
SAITOU TAKASHI	WORST
AIKAWA JUN	RED
KUNAGISA TOMO	BLUE
ME (NARRATOR)	PROTAGONIST

ACT 10 - THE ORANGE SEED

0

It's party time.

1

Orange hair.

Orange braids as thick as rope reached down to her hips and were tied with a red band. Her bangs were brushed backwards to wildly expose her large and beautiful forehead.

Thick, strong-willed eyebrows.

Oddly defiant slanted eyes.

Sparkling orange pupils.

Abandoning her getas, barefoot.

Abandoning her yukata, leggings, and tight shirt.

A small stature.

An excessively small stature.

Limbs so thin they seemed like they would break if you touched them.

However, they were flexible.

Bent so much that they were roaring.

But they never broke.

A cat.

That figure reminiscent of a cat—

Omokage Magokoro.

"……!"

First — the closest one, Moeta-kun.

The one present where Magokoro's arm reached out was Moeta-kun.

Even though Magokoro had been behind them for a while, even though it seemed like they were all walking together, Moeta-kun turned back towards her with a confused expression, as if he had just finally noticed her. However, Ishinagi Moeta acted as one would expect from the Grim Reaper house. Judging that Magokoro's arm was going to strike at his center while still turning around, he opposed her by guarding his chest with both of his arms at a speed that can only be described as reflexive.

"How foolish."

The fox-masked man said beside me.

Certainly, it was probably foolish.

Judging from the result, that's all I could say.

If he could make a defensive move, then evading should have been possible too — rather, even though dodging should have been easier in this case, Moeta-kun didn't do that. Naturally, Moeta-kun had his own ideas, but in this case, no matter what ideas he may have had, the only correct course of action was to avoid it.

At least in this case, **there is no guarantee that you can defend yourself just because you took a defensive action**.

"—Moeta-kun!"

Crack.

Crack, *crack*...

The sound of breaking bones echoed from far away all the way over here.

However, it wasn't enough to stop the impact, and Moeta-kun's body was sent flying backwards. His legs parted from the gym floor and he was blasted away.

Through the air, at high speed.

I can only express it as being blasted away.

And further, in the spot he was blasted to—

Was Aikawa Jun.

Moeta-kun's body crashed into Aikawa-san.

It was so instantaneous.

It was so sudden.

Sudden enough that Aikawa-san couldn't react.

It shouldn't have been an unavoidable speed.

Even though the distance was close to zero, it shouldn't have been unavoidable.

Then, maybe she was simply surprised.

By the existence that blew Moeta-kun away...

Maybe there was something she felt.

Because.

That orange hair was.

For Aikawa Jun—

".....Wha!?"

Moeta-kun had crashed into Aikawa-san, but that wasn't the end of it. The shockwave didn't vanish with just that. It didn't stop. The two of them rolled further back, as if they were entangled. At this point they had stopped flying through the air, but without being able to get a grip on the gym floor, they banged into it here and there and didn't stop until they both hit their heads hard against the far end wall, making a loud noise.

After the crash, they stopped moving.

That shape.

It was as if… they had sunk into the wall.

"......Wh-what……?"

What is that… that power?

It's not like she put that much force into it. She simply, as if separating some tall grass while moving through a forest, **mowed them down** with her arms.

With that... two humans.

A man and a woman, neither of whom can be said to be of small stature, with just one attack, she blasted away both Moeta-kun and Aikawa-san with pure power completely outside of common sense.

"Kukukuh."

The fox-masked man laughed.

"It's not something to be surprised about — the human body is packed with enough muscle to be able to pull off a stunt of that level from the start. Me, you, him, everyone. There is no exception. There is no real need to train, no need to forge yourself — we just don't know how to use it. We just don't have the proficiency to use it. We just don't have the need to use it. It's simply that we're just saving it. No, more than being saved, it may be the key itself."

"The key……."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to bring up some mundane story about how we only use thirty percent of our brains — what I mean here is literally the key. In other words, if you open the lock and crawl inside **— it's that simple**."

That simple.

That simple...

"Even I don't wish to open that locked room. Well, my mouth always gets slippery when **boasting about my relatives**, but now that I think about it, that sort of explanation was unnecessary for you, my enemy. After all..."

The fox-masked man said.

"**You were the one to open the lock**."

Stop… stop.

Don't say it.

Please don't say that.

Don't talk like you know anything.

Even though you don't know anything about us… and even if you did, I don't need you to tell me that.

I...

We...

Never intended to do that.

That kind of intention... we didn't have it.

"Well, since we're talking like this, maybe those *Killing Name* guys just have their locks left open. They're a careless bunch who don't lock their doors... right, Houko-chan? Isn't your *Eating One* exactly like

that, Izumu?"

Turning back and looking at the spot next to me, the fox-masked man laughed again, "Kukukuh."

"Hmm. Quick as expected."

When I looked,

neither Izumu-kun nor Houko-chan were there.

Niounomiya Izumu.

Yamiguchi Houko.

Izumu-kun, who should have been behind me, and Houko-chan, who should have been beside me – before I had realized it, they had already rushed in.

Rushed in.

Already, they had jumped off the stage and were running towards Omokage Magokoro in a straight line without any wasted movements, pincering her from both sides.

Rapidly.

Swiftly.

Quickly.

From both sides, like a pincer.

Quickly, with the movements of a hunter.

"No... Nimbly, I should say."

"Houko-chan… Izumu-kun."

Wait.

Please wait.

No, don't.

She is...

She, Omokage Magokoro is…

Omokage Magokoro isn't an enemy.

Magokoro was… since before, always.

Never anyone's enemy.

Even though she was no one's enemy…

"This is interesting… very interesting." The fox-masked man said, sounding extremely bored. "Look closely, my enemy. This isn't the kind of thing you can see every day. It’s an event that's normally impossible, fitting for the end of the world. A team up between the

first and second ranks of the *Killing Names*; it's probably the first time in history that this has happened."

"You..."

I realized that my voice was trembling.

Scary.

Scary, scary.

I was afraid of this man, the fox-masked man.

"You… what you are doing, the kind of thing that you are doing here and now, do you understand?"

"I understand. I understand it all too well. I am a clump of self-awareness. **Unlike the you from before**, my enemy." The fox-masked man said smoothly. "It's fine, my enemy. Now look — don't miss it. The terrifying cooperation between the *Niounomiya* and the *Yamiguchi*..."

Those two...

Izumu-kun and Houko-chan seemingly jumped at Magokoro at the exact same time, but in reality, there was a very slight time lag between them.

Just a little.

Houko-chan was just slightly ahead.

It was an act called dispersion.

From the point of view of an amateur like me, it seems more advantageous to attack at the same time when in a battle of many against one — but in reality, by slightly delaying the attack, it makes the timing much more difficult to measure for the receiving side. In other words, it is a gap to catch the enemy individually while in a group — nevertheless.

Pulling that off on the fly without any preparation is impressive, but in this case, it's the same as when Moeta-kun chose to block instead of dodge. Those two shouldn't have taken such a cunning move. It would have probably been better to simply strike at the same time.

Against someone to whom an instant is an eternity.

There is no other choice.

Houko-chan's arm was **dodged**.

Like rubber, or maybe like a fluid with high viscosity, in a movement so flexible it makes you sick just watching it, Magokoro lifted her leg high and, using it like a sickle, swung at the rushing Houko-chan's neck. Like that, she used Houko-chan's momentum to her advantage, without moving a single step — as a result, just by twisting her torso, she evaded Houko-chan's attack.

In that instant.

Houko-chan crashed cheek first onto the gymnasium floor.

She couldn't even absorb the shock with her hands.

It sounded like metal hitting against metal.

And.

The next instant.

Niounomiya Izumu's attack, which should originally have been delayed, **was perfectly on time** — and headed towards Magokoro.

Izumu-kun's face stiffened.

He couldn't stop now.

And it was the same.

Unlike Houko-chan, he attacked with his legs, but - with almost the same movement, Magokoro **parried** that leg and swung hers raised high towards Izumu-kun. With his original momentum and the movement of the leg pulling him, Izumu-kun hit the floor.

And, probably because of the surplus of momentum, Magokoro took two, then three steps forward and nearly fell, but...

Stopped.

Omokage Magokoro — was standing.

Even Ishinagi Moeta.

Even Aikawa Jun.

Even Yamiguchi Houko.

Even Niounomiya Izumu.

Among all of her collapsed opponents in the second gymnasium of Sumiyuri Academy, Omokage Magokoro alone was left standing.

"....."

It was nonsensical.

This kind of thing was impossible.

No matter what.

No matter what.

The Omokage Magokoro I knew — wasn't that nonsensical.

"Kukukuh... it's not something you see often. *Niounomiya* and *Yamiguchi* cooperating, and for that cooperation to break apart in an instant. It is fitting for the world's end."

"You..." With a tone filled with fear, I asked the fox-masked man. "What in the world did you use?"

" 'What did you use'. Hm. That doesn't make sense. It's a fine question for yourself, but for a question you want answered, you should be more concrete."

"She was..."

The Orange Seed.

Omokage Magokoro.

"**She was dead.**"

"....."

"Omokage Magokoro died in a conflagration — I confirmed that with my eyes. With my eyes, with these two eyeballs. She is not, this late, someone who can casually appear in a place like this."

" 'She is not someone who can casually appear'. Hm." The fox-masked man snorted a laugh. "You really don't know when to give up — this late, your way of thinking is outdated, my enemy. If you say she died, then I died too, and so did my daughter. **Something like the dead being alive** — at this point, it's trivial."

"....!"

The dead's…….. revival.

Living dead.

The fox-masked man added:

"Your line's nuance is different — the nuance is completely different, my enemy. For someone else, maybe, but as you said, she is a human who was dead to you. However, if this truly is Omokage Magokoro, you shouldn't direct any blame towards me, my enemy. Rather— you should approve and rejoice. Shouldn't you thank me, my enemy? **Because the friend you thought dead is alive and well**."

"....."

"Approve and rejoice."

What a selfish thing to say.

Don't joke around.

Was it… really that simple?

It wasn't even something difficult.

That was blasphemy.

That was an insult.

Even if... even if, as the fox-masked man said, *destiny really* existed, that *a Story* or something like that existed in this world...

Wasn't this man the one ignoring it the most, the one toying with it the most?

Defying, insulting and scorning.

I couldn't think otherwise.

"....."

However...

I couldn't say anything.

I couldn't say anything else.

Why couldn't I say any more?

By doing that - wasn't that the same as accepting what the fox-masked man was saying?

I...

Was I rejoicing?

Or was I grieving?

Or was I angry?

I didn't know...

I didn't know my own feelings.

"Kukukuh..." The fox-masked man said. "More importantly, my enemy. Look, it's not totally over yet — the fight went smoothly, but isn't there one person who has received almost no damage?"

"Eh?"

Reverting my gaze from the fox-masked man...

Aikawa Jun was standing up.

After softly laying down Moeta-kun, whom she was holding, she stood in front of Magokoro, facing her.

Ah……. I see.

It's not that Aikawa-san couldn't avoid Moeta-kun. She was simply

protecting Moeta-kun, who was blasted away after receiving Magokoro's attack. They didn't crash, she just buffered the shock. Then, rolling backwards too, it wasn't because she lost to the momentum, but judged that it would be better to roll.

Then...

Aikawa Jun received no damage.

"Hmm. As usual, you still haven't gotten rid of that softness, my daughter; well, not that I care about that, though."

"....."

"Now then. If I were to phrase it alluringly for entertainment's sake, this would be Humanity's Strongest versus the New Humanity's Strongest — I guess. That being said, my daughter doesn't fully know what she's fighting against..."

Aikawa-san... didn't avert her eyes?

She glared at Magokoro.

Of course, even though it was a surprise hit, she broke both of Moeta-kun's arms and blasted him away, while also managing to easily shatter the never before seen combination of *Niounomiya* and *Yamiguchi*. Against that existence, even Humanity's Strongest could not afford to be half-assed.

Also, more than that.

Aikawa-san should have been feeling something.

Towards the orange before her eyes, Omokage Magokoro.

Like the something I felt before Zerozaki Hitoshiki — Aikawa Jun should be feeling something before Omokage Magokoro.

Even if she didn't avoid Moeta-kun on purpose, against Magokoro, that feeling should have been stronger now.

As proof of that...

It seemed that Aikawa-san had completely failed to notice us on the distant stage. No, more than failing to notice, not being conscious of us would be more fitting.

Of me and...

Her father's existence, she was not conscious.

Instead, that consciousness,

was aimed only at the one in front of her.

".....**You — what are you?**"

Aikawa-san asked Magokoro in a low voice.

It felt like she was displeased and puzzled.

That was the first time I saw Aikawa-san like this.

And, probably, that was also the first time Aikawa-san experienced something like this.

And,

I wonder, for Magokoro...

Magokoro didn't react whatsoever.

To Aikawa-san's words, she didn't react.

Looking closely.

".....Eh?"

I let out a surprised voice.

"Kukuku..."

Magokoro was sleeping while standing.

Closing her eyes and occasionally dropping her jaw.

She was completely asleep **—** swaying as if on a boat.

"Anyhow, she just woke up, since she **was sleeping until just now** my guess is her consciousness is still not totally awake. I said that my daughter only partially understands things, but The Orange Seed — it seems she doesn't understand anything at all."

Slee… ping.

Sleeping.

She — Magokoro, while asleep, kicked the butts of three *Killing Names*?

That was more than nonsensical, it was absurd.

The power balance had completely collapsed.

Like inflation.

An action that could collapse all causality up until now.

That, that would be too...

No, it wasn't.

It wasn't that.

In the first place.

In the first place — that's how it was designed.

Wasn't the concept of the Orange Seed created solely for that

purpose?

Just like when the fox-masked man previously created the Red, who would later come to be called Humanity's Strongest Contractor, alongside his two colleagues, Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya, it was under the directive of collapsing causality and achieving the world's end.

Sleeping.

Sleeping.

Omokage Magokoro was… sleeping.

"**If you wanna sleep that much—**"

Aikawa-san moved.

"**—then sleep for the rest of your life!**"

That instant.

The moment she was yelled at by Aikawa-san—

Omokage Magokoro opened her eyes.

Her orange pupils—

locked onto Aikawa-san.

They focused.

Their eyes — they met.

"Ah."

And then, a moment I would probably never forget arrived.

An instant that you might miss if you blinked?

At this point, I couldn't predict how the world and the story would roll, accelerate, converge, or end in the future at the hands of the fox-masked man, the Worst.

But no matter how it happened.

It was almost irrelevant.

This was the climax.

Aikawa Jun was the one to collapse.

Really — a moment, an instant.

Aikawa-san tried to jump on Magokoro, she tried to go in a straight line, stepping hard with her left foot — before the other foot's heel could part from the gymnasium floor, it had already been settled.

In that instant, Magokoro was in reach of Aikawa-san.

She moved — no, it wasn't something like that.

Even though I didn't take my eyes off her, even though I don't think I took my eyes off her, Magokoro was standing in front of Aikawa-san with a fist made by joining both hands, raised.

And, she swung down that fist.

On the head.

She hammered it around where the temple is.

Without being able to step whatsoever —

Aikawa-san's whole body collapsed on the floor.

Because of the shock's reflection, her body rose back once more, however, in the end it was just a reflection. She soon returned to the floor, not rising up again.

She didn't rise up.

She didn't even budge.

"Aikawa—san."

"Hm."

The fox-masked man said, looking extremely bored.

Rather than being disappointed, it seemed as if it was predestined harmony to him.

"Well, in the end, she's outdated — if an antique goes to the front line, that's what happens. I had a tiny sliver of expectation, but it ended up useless. No matter how much praise it may receive, an antique is an antique, huh? Good grief. That sure was brief."

"..............!"

Magokoro was—

as if it was nothing, with her orange eyes, looking down at Aikawa-san, who was laying face down.

Looking down at Aikawa-san who wasn't budging.

"Looks like she's dead — good grief, she's dead without a doubt. Mm. No, she's just barely alive? But, well, at least one of her eyes was crushed."

The fox-masked man spoke indifferently about his own daughter.

And in that — I felt something repulsive.

Like something clinging onto me.

"You… you, in this situation, faced with this situation, even in a

situation like this — don't you have anything else to say?"

"Hm. Something else to say, huh? Unfortunately, my vocabulary isn't really that abundant, however, certainly, having the daughter that I created be defeated by the granddaughter that I also created, now that I think about it, is somewhat of a complex situation. I do *not* feel any regret..."

"....."

"Don't make a face that's unlike you, my enemy. Calm down, calm down and cool off, my enemy. Also, from your perspective, it may be peculiar to see my daughter lying on the ground like that — but for me, it's something I saw enough times to get bored of it ten years ago. 'What, so she hasn't changed', it's just something of that level. If you want to talk about a rare occurrence, I guess the combination of *Niounomiya* and *Yamiguchi* is..."

".....what do you mean?"

I asked the fox-masked man.

"The Omokage Magokoro I knew — she wasn't that nonsensical, that absurd, that bottomless."

"Hm. What are you trying to say?"

"**You — what did you do to Magokoro?**"

"I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything, nothing at all. Don't misunderstand me, don't misunderstand me. At the very least, I didn't do what you're thinking, what you're imagining. Even if something was done, I wasn't the one to do it."

"Not… you?"

"Rather."

The fox-masked man chose his words.

"Rather — the opposite?"

"....? That's, what do..."

"Oops. My enemy, this is not the moment to engage in idle gossip. My enemy, it seems that Magokoro wants to put an end..."

Looking back—

Magokoro was stepping on Aikawa's head who probably had not an ounce of consciousness left.

She didn't seem to put that much power, just supporting the back

of her foot on her temporal region, it felt like it was just placed — even then, if **that Magokoro** felt like it, she could easily smash a human head.

It was bad.

It was no good.

The current Magokoro — I couldn't stop her.

There was no scabbard for that blade.

There was no brake for that accelerator pedal.

There was no brake for that acceleration...

I was not there for her.

Aimlessly.

As I was about to unconsciously descend from the stage —

the fox-masked man stopped me.

"Hold on, my enemy. Where are you intending to go?"

"Where..."

It was obvious.

I had to go.

I had to rush over.

I had to be there.

"If it's for your reunion greetings, hold on just a bit more — me too, I still haven't said a word to my daughter either. Hm. I wonder if her consciousness is ever gonna come back…….. well, I don't care either way. More importantly, my enemy—"

The fox-masked man said.

"-—it seems there's one more disturbance."

"Eh……..?"

"As expected of the *Man Eater* — the Niounomiya Troupe's worst failed creation. Even if his speciality is to eat, he won't get eaten easily, huh?"

"—Izumu-kun."

Niounomiya Izumu — was standing up.

Blood flowed from his forehead.

His legs were somewhat shaky.

But his eyes clearly possessed a powerful will.

He was looking at Omokage Magokoro.

"Yamiguchi Houko-chan ate the same move an instant before, so he was able to prepare himself. Even if he couldn't withstand the hit, he was ready to hit the floor. So it reduced the damage to the minimum, huh? Hm. Really, when it comes to battles, he is undeniably a genius — when it comes to just battles, he probably far exceeds my daughter." The fox-masked man expressed his admiration honestly. "However, I wonder about waking up now — in that exchange from earlier, you must have understood that you can't win against the Orange. Foolish."

"Foolish, you say..."

"In the end, he is lacking half of himself. If Rizumu, in charge of managing the weakness, was still there, he could bear to lose and retreat— hm. It seems that Izumu, in charge of managing the strength, cannot admit defeat. It looks like he couldn't overcome this weak point, even after facing my daughter."

"Uh—"

When I was about to descend off the stage nonetheless, the fox-masked man grabbed my wrist and physically stopped me.

He wasn't that strong.

However — I couldn't shake him off.

I couldn't seem to be able to shake him off.

"Don't go."

The fox-masked man put some strength in his voice.

"You can't go."

"But, like that—"

"Don't worry, just don't go. Don't go. I won't tolerate you bothering Izumu. We should continue to just shut up and watch. I know more about Izumu than you, my enemy."

"....."

I wonder, Izumu-kun...

Clenching his fists and his teeth.

Glaring at Omokage Magokoro.

"**You**—"

And Izumu-kun opened his mouth.

"**—move that filthy foot from there**."

Saying that, Izumu-kun pointed at Magokoro's foot stepping on Aikawa-san.

"Move — don't you get that you should move that foot, bastard? Aahn? Can't you hear me?"

Magokoro...

Didn't respond.

Not one reaction.

As if she couldn't hear him, she didn't move.

She didn't even look at Izumu-kun.

Just Aikawa-san.

As if **there was something she couldn't accept**, she was looking at Aikawa-san with her orange eyes.

Rather than looking — was she observing?

No.

She was confirming.

She was gazing as if confirming something.

"....."

—I didn't get it.

I couldn't read Magokoro's expression at all.

Now, what was she thinking, I didn't get it.

There was also the problem of distance, but...

No, it wasn't that.

Between me and Magokoro, there was no distance.

Even then.

I couldn't read it.

I couldn't see it.

I couldn't reach it.

What is it Magokoro?

What happened to you?

What in the world happened to you?

It was abnormal.

As if different.

You were...

You weren't that kind of person, right?

"Don't just ignore me, bastard!!"

Izumu-kun was enraged.

It was bad — this was bad!

Last month, no, since a new day began, the month also changed, so it's like two months ago!

At that time, Izumu could easily suppress me with his massive amounts of destructive power, but then too, **he got irritated**, which is why I'm still alive.

As the fox-masked man said — that was a weakness.

It was a weak point.

Niounomiya Izumu's weak point.

The weakness of the *Man Eater* without weakness.

"Rhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa FEASTING!!"

Raising his abnormally long arms above his head.

Spreading out his hands like a peacock.

Getting just one step closer, he danced in the air.

Eating One.

Niounomiya Izumu's secret technique, his trump card.

Right off the bat, he released it with both arms.

Without mercy.

If you looked only at the movement, it was just a slap.

But that power could easily crush concrete with just one hand. Using both hands, he could probably completely erase one child from this world, a literal one-hit surefire technique.

The one-hit surefire technique of someone who had completely opened their door.

However.

He was not Omokage Magokoro's enemy.

Right...

Magokoro was no one's enemy.

Unchallenged and undefeated.

The last of the last, remaining until the end of the end...

The only one left at the last end.

Therefore — the Last.

Not the Strongest nor the Worst — the Last.

Humanity's Last, the Orange Seed!

"*Eating One*, huh — though it's a good technique. Though it's a really good technique. Though it is a technique that even I, Humanity's Worst, dread, that makes me shiver to the very bottom of my heart — even then, now that he is lacking Rizumu, its power will clearly drop." The fox-masked man said. "That kind of big move isn't something to casually pull out again and again — it's a trump card precisely because you take it out at the right time. Whether you do it with one hand or with two, the span of time between the start and the end is too long."

In reality — that was correct.

However.

However, at the very least, Izumu-kun's wish came true.

It went as Izumu-kun predicted.

Magokoro took her foot off of Aikawa-san.

She took her sole off of Aikawa-san's head.

And next.

In the next instant.

Omokage Magokoro was stepping on Izumu-kun.

She had moved in close range to Izumu-kun.

This time, it was the opposite of earlier.

She didn't parry like earlier.

She didn't dodge like earlier.

She didn't divert like earlier.

From the front.

Against Izumu-kun who tried to get in front of the front,

she went even further in front.

She released one blow against Izumu-kun's chest, which was completely unprotected due to his raised arms.

Only using brute force,

she released one blow.

"----------!"

The right side of the torso.

The right side of the torso... became **uprooted**.

Even though it was happening in front of me, I couldn't understand that phenomenon.

For a human body... to be destroyed by a human hand.

It wasn't even a one-hit surefire technique.

Just a strike.

Just a simple strike using her strength.

Lacking any technique or tactics.

But, even then...

It had the same power, the same destructive force as Izumu-kun's *Eating One*.

Niounomiya Izumu had completely lost balance by having his chest gouged out. But even then, he was no longer at a point where he could stop his *Eating One*, which had already accelerated — he unleashed his arms in the wrong direction, and, being pathetically pulled by the inertia of his own move,

he collapsed.

The second fall.

An inevitable fall.

However — this time, he wouldn't get up again.

Sliding on the gymnasium's floor,

slipping on the gymnasium's floor,

blood,

flesh,

and organs,

Spilling.

He didn't move.

He didn't move.

He didn't move — anymore...

"Hm."

The fox-masked man — he looked on with cold eyes.

"**With this, you finally were able to lose**. Izumu — it seems my daughter wasn't able to completely let you lose. My daughter really really really hasn't changed at all since ten years ago. She's soft……..

Her endgame, her personality, everything. It must have been a real pain from your perspective; how irritating errors in calculation are. However, with that, being the one who failed to die last month — your Back Nozzle is finally completed."

"Kuh... y-you."

This guy — was he really a human?

Was that a human?

How could those be the words of a human?

As if… he was a human failure.

Magokoro...

Magokoro briefly looked at her surroundings.

Surroundings...

Sumiyuri Academy's second gymnasium.

This time, only Magokoro was standing.

Just her.

"....."

Then, Magokoro opened her mouth widely and —

"Gerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerageragerage

—she laughed loudly.

Loudly,

ferociously,

and savagely.

Like a muddy stream gulping down everything, she laughed.

"That's fine," the fox-masked man said, "the superior entity must put aside any kind of events and first laugh — joy and anger and grief and fun, happenings and defenses and failures and conclusions don't matter — first laugh, laugh loudly, laugh and laugh and laugh and go crazy, Omokage Magokoro."

Omokage Magokoro's laughter — it didn't stop.

Along with a dark exhilaration.

And orange,

Disheveling her orange hair,

she laughed.

Laughing crazily.

"Now— "

I — I screamed.
As Magokoro's scabbard.
As Magokoro's limiter.
Magokoro's...
I was Magokoro's...
"**—You can stop now, Magokoro!**"
Instantly.
Finally, I should say.
Omokage Magokoro looked **this way**.
At the fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi,
and at me, on top of the gymnasium's stage.
Then, Magokoro —
for the first time, she showed a real expression.
A mysterious one.
Then — a surprised expression.
She wasn't looking at the fox-masked man.
But at me.
At me.
Magokoro said.

"Ii-chan."

However, that was all.
Then, Magokoro,
as if her battery ran out.
Crumbled.
Crumbled was the right word, there was no other way to express it.
As if her knees came loose,
as if her heart suddenly stopped,
like the other four—
she collapsed face first on the gymnasium's floor.
And...
Didn't move.
Like the other four,
she didn't move.

"Ma-Magokoro!?"

"Don't panic, don't rush, don't be flustered — this is also merely a predestined harmony. Hm. No... maybe it was a bit late."

"Mi-mister fox?"

"My enemy. Do you think I would make a monster like her my subordinate without any restrictions — without a brake, without a scabbard, and more importantly, without you? I already learned my lesson when I died ten years ago."

Ten years ago...

Aikawa-san, huh?

"*Thirteen Stairs*."

The fox-masked man matter-of-factly, not explaining anything, bluntly said.

"Originally, *Thirteen Stairs* wasn't built with a grand objective in mind. I was just gathering people with enough existential power to influence the Story — in other words, **the main cast**. It was just a group resulting from that, however, ever since you became my enemy, that objective changed. Their new goal is divided in two. First, is to confront you. With Noise as the representative, the Miotsukushi Sisters, Misora and Takami, as well as Yamiguchi Nureginu and Furuyari Zukin, were chosen for that objective."

Though Zukin should be counted as an exception, the fox-masked man added.

"And the other objective, rather, the most pressing duty, the control of the one who cannot be removed from our destiny, the Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro."

"....."

Control.

Brake.

Scabbard.

"The ones chosen for that objective are Tokinomiya Jikoku, Kino Raichi... and, the one over there, Migishita Rurero."

The fox-masked man pointed to the other side of the iron door where the masked Magokoro, Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun came through.

A woman was there.

How should I say it...

At first glance, she had an appearance that made you think.

Bandages wrapped all over her body.

Gauze and tape.

Plaster, a corset, and a crutch.

And her arms and her leg,

scars all over her body.

Maybe to change her bandages more easily, her clothes were very simple, almost like she was only wearing bandages.

Drawing a curve only possible for a woman, more than just pretty, I felt like the word 'beautiful' fit her more. The bandages and gauzes against her bodyline, similar to an automobile optimised for speed, were so painfully erotic that I unconsciously swallowed my words.

An eyepatch on her right eye.

Only her left eye could be seen.

She was wearing glasses without rims.

"Aah, I will tell you just in case, but don't misunderstand, my enemy — though it probably can't be helped, since you already seem to have met Sonoki, but Rurero didn’t dress like this for cosplay — she just got a bit hurt training Magokoro."

"Tr…… training?"

Migishita Rurero...

So that's Migishita Rurero?

If I remember correctly, Migishita Rurero's title was...

Her title was Puppeteer.

Puppet.

Puppet...?

"Yo, Rurero — you're a bit late."

"Is that so... that's my bad. Unlike Jikoku, I don't have any particular obsession with time, you see."

Rurero-san answered vulgarly.

Without displaying any particular emotion, she looked around the gymnasium.

Including Magokoro, there were five people on the floor.

Moeta-kun, Aikawa-san, Houko-chan, Izumu-kun, and Magokoro, looking at them in order...

She sighed from the bottom of her heart.

She seemed listless.

It was bizarre, coupled with her bandaged appearance.

"What about Sonoki? Didn't you bring her here?"

"Who knows. I wonder where she went. I searched more or less, but I didn't meet her — I don't know about anything else other than my puppets."

"Is that so. Can't be helped then."

The fox-masked man took out a cellphone from his sleeve.

……

Hey, so he had one, a cellphone……

It didn't fit him……

"I won't tell you my number."

The fox-masked man glanced at me and said so.

……

Though he'd probably found mine out anyway.

Assistant professor Kigamine knew it too.

The fox-masked man inputted an eleven digit number swiftly.

"Yo, Sonoki. The second gymnasium is filled with injured people."

He said, and then hung up the phone.

Even though the other side picked up, it didn't feel like a conversation. It was very business-like. To be fair, if he's going to deal with Emoto-san, that might have been the best way to handle it……

"Now, my enemy. It's fine now."

"……?"

"Quickly — with haste, go rush to someone's side. Will it be my daughter that you trust so much, or maybe your beloved Houko-chan? Maybe Magokoro that you met for the first time in a few years? Or maybe, since it'll be your last chance to see him before he parts from this world, Niounomiya Izumu?"

"……!"

I jumped off the stage.

Landed, and ran without leaving a moment to think.

It irritated me — that way of saying it really irritated me.

However, just in that instance, he was completely right.

Now,

no matter what, the obvious choice now was Niounomiya Izumu.

Izumu-kun... it was bad.

His degree of **collapse** was different from the other four.

His guts were leaking out.

His blood, flesh, and organs were leaking equally.

It was much more than a fatal wound.

The small and trivial wound on my chest couldn't be compared to it — this was an overwhelmingly fatal wound.

The situation was different from two months ago.

Two months ago, his heart was gouged out and his neck was cut, but he still managed to survive. That was the frightening power of a Niounomiya — however, as compensation, the *little sister* personality of the Niounomiya Siblings of Massacre Magic was lost, and only the *big brother* was left.

Rizumu-chan disappeared and Izumu-kun was left.

However,

this month, there was no compensation.

So he had to die.

Immortal and indestructible… such terms don't exist in this world.

That girl...

That immortal girl, even Madoka Kuchiha died.

Whether you are immortal or not it’s the same — if you're killed, you die.

Izumu-kun...

Izumu-kun, Izumu-kun, Izumu-kun...

"Izumu-kun!"

For about five seconds, I ran without taking a single breath, eventually reaching the spot where Izumu-kun was. Without even thinking about avoiding Izumu-kun's blood and flesh that was sprayed around, in a straight line, through the shortest distance possible, I rushed to his side.

Holding the facedown Izumu-kun, I flipped him around.

Izumu-kun was...

Still not dead.

Still living.

There was consciousness in his opened eyes.

However, that was.

That was just a still.

Rather than still being alive—

he was just alive *for now*.

Even if he had consciousness, he had no will.

Nor a mind.

His breath was faint.

He was not breathing. He was groaning painfully.

"Ah……..ah, ah."

His breathless groaning — it couldn't form words.

"I…… Izumu-kun!"

"What a face you're making……. that's pathetic, Onii-san — is that the face of the man my cute little sister fell for……."

"Don-don't speak! Now, now, Emoto-san will come, so— "

Will come, so?

Will come, so — so what?

What would happen?

Would she tie Izumu-kun's sprayed organs together?

No matter what kind of doctor Emoto-san was...

There was no way she could do that.

"Ah…… that's— " Izumu-kun probably understood that himself and without paying any mind to me, he continued. "That's, what, Onii-san's friend? Err, the orange, that nonsensical one……"

"Ra, rather than a friend— "

I couldn't answer.

I didn't get it.

What exactly — she was.

Omokage Magokoro was certainly my colleague when I was a student of the ER3 Program during my time in America, however, she wasn't like this.

It’s as if it was another person.

But... however...

When she called me, in that moment.

Just in that instant.

Certainly — that was Magokoro.

The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro.

"I lost... huh?"

Izumu-kun said with an emotional tone.

Of course he had things to think about.

On this point, as the person in question said, the fox-masked man understood Izumu-kun better than me.

However, even then.

Even then...

"Mi-mister fox, what happened to him?"

"Th, that person..."

"Keh…….. I'm sure that, for that guy, whether someone like me lives or dies — it's the same thing."

"....."

"That pisses me off too…….. then, I can't be saved…… so, for this poor me, at the end, at the end of the end, I gotta go all out — and get my revenge."

So that my death can have meaning.

Saying that, Izumu-kun suddenly,

with his long arms, he grabbed me.

Probably using the last of his strength.

Enlacing me, he clang to me.

And,

approaching my ear,

"**Zerozaki Hitoshiki is alive**."

He said that line.

"....."

"Kiss."

While caressing my cheek with his lips,

Izumu-kun's arms loosened.

It really was... the last of his strength.

Just like that, as if my arms couldn't stop it, like a fire being put

out, like a drop of water hitting the floor — his long arms spread out and fell.

"Ah…… what—"

Niounomiya Izumu,

hazily, with his pupils having lost most of their clarity,

Looked up at the air.

"So you were there... Rizumu."

His last words — they were his little sister's name.

Many people perished, and one of the few survivors of that August case, Niounomiya Izumu...

Here, has died.

Two months late — he finally died.

Back Nozzle...

That phenomenon — so that's what is was?

If that's the case, that thing — I can only say it's the worst.

It's scary.

Far too... scary.

Ultimately, the one currently confronting me with malice wasn't the fox-masked man — it was the world and the Story. I realized that from the bottom of my heart. It was scary.

Niounomiya Izumu.

Also, Niounomiya Rizumu.

The Niounomiya Siblings of Massacre Magic.

"Kukukuh."

Behind my back, the sound of laughter could be heard.

When I turned to glare.

The fox-masked man was there.

"Perhaps it's the first time someone died in your arms, my enemy — a different feeling than simply hearing about the result or discovering the corpse, isn't it?"

".....if it's someone dying in front of me, it has happened."

"But not in your arms, right?"

"....."

Kukukuh, the fox-masked man laughed.

On his right shoulder,

he was carrying Aikawa Jun.

Like he was lending her his shoulder.

Aikawa-san's eyes — they were closed.

Her consciousness hadn't returned.

She wasn't bleeding, however, I often heard that it was worse to not be bleeding after an attack to the head. It seemed that she wasn't dead, but that didn't put me at ease. I wondered... would she be fine?

However, even more than those worries, the fox-masked man lending a shoulder to Aikawa-san, that scene made me feel a certain discomfort. Of course, it wasn't that there was anything wrong with their appearances. Aikawa-san was quite tall, but the fox-masked man, while being thin as a threat, was taller than Aikawa-san. I thought he wouldn't be able to carry her on his shoulder, but he was doing it so indifferently, naturally.

Naturally.

Like father and daughter.

That naturalness — it was the source of the discomfort.

An abnormal sense of discomfort.

"My enemy with that — **this party** is over. After this, you can scatter in small groups, there won't be an afterparty. If you wait a bit, Sonoki will gladly rush over, so each of them will receive treatment. Of course, not only for that Grim Reaper and Houko-chan, but you too, my enemy. You use your body a little too roughly — so do be careful. I'm not saying that as an enemy, but as a simple warning of common sense. It doesn't look like you acted particularly wildly this time, but any injury can be deadly, so at least get that wound on your chest checked."

"So you — you noticed?"

"Of course I did. There's no way I wouldn't catch on to how you were walking and protecting your chest — that much, you can ascertain even without being Sonoki."

"....."

Even then, while knowing that, he advised me to run……? Rather than nonsensical or absurd, he might be more so.

No, that's definitely the case.

He's the Worst...

Humanity's Worst.

Ah, right.

Magokoro.

"Magokoro— "

"Magokoro-chan is this way."

Getting close to the fox-masked man,

carrying Magokoro with her hands and looking inconvenienced by her crutch — Migishita Rurero entered my field of vision.

Rurero-san.

Rurero-san looked at me.

Looking awfully interested.

"Nice to meet you, *Ii-chan*."

"....."

"I'm Migishita Rurero — the seventh of *Thirteen Stairs*."

Rurero-san said.

"Nice to meet you. Though we are enemies, since it's our first meeting, you don't have to behave this curtly."

"…….yes. Nice to meet you, Rurero-san."

"I generally operate behind the scenes, so I thought I wouldn't get to meet you,however, I see. Setting apart what the other *Thirteen Stairs* think, looking at you, I can clearly understand why mister fox chose you to be his enemy."

Rurero-san said.

"**With this body, I understand well**."

"……..you… to Magokoro..."

To Magokoro — what did you do, I wanted to ask.

Training.

The fox-masked man used that word.

Puppet.

Being a puppeteer — that was her role.

And, **rather, flipping it upside down**, the meaning of those significant words:

Migishita Rurero.

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Kino Raichi.

Looking at these three together,

The answer appears by itself.

If it were to appear, I didn't want to ask.

That answer — I didn't want to hear it.

"Kukukuh." As if reading my thoughts, the fox-masked man giggled. "Then, we will temporarily excuse ourselves from here. Looking at the time, we will contact you from our side. Wait silently for direct contact from me, my enemy. It's October. September ended and it's October now — the October I hate so much has come around this year too. Each and every year, faithfully. I swear, what might happen, I can't restrain my anticipation! However, my enemy, you must rest first. Heal that body as much as you can. Take care of yourself with all your might."

"....mister, fox."

"And, though it's obvious in Magokoro's case, I will also take my daughter — I will take her with me. Though it has no relation to the Story, she has some tales I don't want others to hear."

"....."

"Be at ease, I won't make that antique my ally at this point — if I had to say, she's more interesting as an enemy. It's more interesting for you to have her as your card. That's what I think, my enemy. But try to be in my place. I was killed by her ten years ago. I just want to casually tell her some resentful words."

"....."

Resentful words...

Even though there's no way the fox-masked man had any of those.

What was he planning?

What was he trying to do to Aikawa-san?

What more was he trying to do?

"The *Thirteen Stairs* and I will leave this Sumiyuri Academy today — our reason for being here is gone. It's not like I don't have any regrets, but, well, it's the same either way — we will now go around to other places. Well then— "

The fox-masked man briefly took his mask off.

And flashed me a smile with his true face.

"Ciao, my enemy."

And with that,

he turned his back to me.

"I swear… what a rude person. Saying whatever he wants. I wonder if he ever thinks about the trouble he's causing to everyone around him? Ah, mmm, well then, *Ii-chan*. I'll probably never meet you again. Well, try to do your best."

Saying that, Migishita Rurero followed after him.

Naturally, Omokage Magokoro, carried by Rurero-san, and Aikawa Jun, carried by the fox-masked man, left this second gymnasium too.

Inside the dim gymnasium.

Only I was left.

Clang.

Clang, clang.

Clang, clang, clang.

Even though there was no clock anywhere around, I felt like I was hearing the sound of time being carved.

Only time was progressing.

Now, nothing would happen.

Nothing would happen.

"....."

Aikawa Jun.

Saitou Takashi.

Omokage Magokoro.

Humanity's Strongest, Humanity's Worst and Humanity's Last.

Certainly, it was the end.

This was the end.

What else, other than the end, could this be?

But, even then.

It looked like it wouldn't be the end.

2

When Emoto-san arrived in a rush to the second gymnasium, with a smile that made you wonder if the muscles of your face could even be shaped that way, Moeta-kun and Houko-chan began to regain consciousness.

Houko-chan just had a cut on her forehead. Like the Miotsukushi Sisters, she only had a light concussion.

After promptly doing emergency treatment, Emoto-san said "I was just called by mister fox, so……..." and left the gymnasium. It seemed that mister fox called her again after leaving the gymnasium. It was probably to treat Aikawa-san and Magokoro. Whether Magokoro even needed any treatment, I didn't know.

Before she left, Emoto-san was,

"....."

In silence, she was looking at Izumu-kun.

I thought she would cry, but she didn't.

And then she told us "I think Konomi-chan will deal with it, so leave Izumu-kun like that."

She didn't cry.

But she seemed sadder than ever before.

Returning to the main subject,

Well, essentially, Moeta-kun and Houko-chan didn't have as many injuries as I was worried about, so that was a relief.

Cleats for Moeta-kun's arms.

A gauze for Houko-chan's forehead.

That level of damage.

Looking at everything at once —it was minimal.

Treating Aikawa-san and Izumu-kun as irregular participants, we,

Houko-chan, Moeta-kun, and I, the residents from the apartment, didn't suffer a single loss — we also obtained the antidote for Miiko-san's disease.

Of course,

even if the wounds on our bodies were light,

in this case, the wounds on our mind —they were much deeper.

Too much.

Yamiguchi Houko, Ishinagi Moeta.

Obviously, when they were in treatment it could be excused, but even after they regained consciousness, they hadn't said a word.

They were obstinately silent.

Not only the normally talkative Moeta-kun, but even more so Houko-chan, who didn't even try to look me in the eye. Trying to cheer them up, I told them how, after reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, wanting to read another book from the same author, I read *Tooth and Nails* and finished it without even realizing, but even those charming tales of my youth had no effect.

…….

At the beginning there's a moment just like this, in that book.

So — well, that also applies to me in the end — humans can't stay forever at the same place.

Since Emoto-san only did emergency treatment, Houko-chan and Moeta-kun would have to go to the hospital to receive real treatment, and also to deliver Miiko-san's antidote.

We had to go home.

There were no enemies here anymore.

To put it like the fox-masked man would:

This place was already finished.

Finished.

It lost all meaning.

And, for the time being, since Aikawa-san's car, with which we came to this Sumiyuri Academy, can no longer move due to *the accident*, we didn't have any means of transport — when the three of us decided to go back, I finally realized that.

I realized that, and it couldn't be helped.

We couldn't do anything about it.

There's no way we could've called a taxi or an ambulance, since the situation was what it was.

So we had no choice other than to walk.

In the end, we only stayed at the academy for a few hours, making the current time a bit past one in the morning — when we arrive back to civilization, it would probably be time for the buses and trains to start moving.

Though that was an optimistic prediction.

I thought it might have been hard for the two injured to walk, but they didn't look like they couldn't handle it.

During that time too, they didn't speak to me.

Maybe they didn't care.

Thinking about it, I don't really know for Moeta-kun, but at the very least, for Houko-chan, this was her first battle.

It was a painful result, right?

Since words of comfort were probably meaningless, I stayed silent and, eventually, the sky having lit up, we somehow managed to reach civilization. Until we found a train station, among us, there was no conversation. Though I said civilization, it was an incredibly rural area, so the diagram was a straight line for a few hours. But even then, a train was a train. Switching to the subway at a random station, we would go directly to the hospital where Miiko-san was. Since I snuck out of that hospital (and Rabumi-san probably didn't do any follow up), like Houko-chan and Moeta-kun, I would be hospitalized — rehospitalized.

Anyway, our legs were stiff.

As expected of *Killing Names*, Houko-chan and Moeta-kun didn't look tired at all, but for an amateur like me, walking from Sumiyuri Academy all the way to this station was harsh. However, there were no seats in this countryside station, so when the train arrived after a few dozen minutes, the three of us took our seats, lined up and spent our time.

Idly.

Meaninglessly.

Each of us had things to think about.

What I thought about was,

naturally, Omokage Magokoro.

Happy to meet her again, surprised to see her again — that would be somewhat lacking in emotion, but now that we are far from that academy **why after all this time**, is the thought that crossed my mind first.

Why after all this time?

Why... was Magokoro there?

In the world of the living?

Even though she... she should have died.

Even though she died.

Even though it was like I killed her.

Even though I killed her.

No — it's as the fox-masked man said, at this point, after all of that, people's lives and deaths may be surprisingly simple topics.

Like a mystery novel to trick kids, dying and coming back to life and, in fact, not having been dead at all and the first victim being the culprit, maybe it's a problem of that degree.

Even until now, it's been similar to that.

It was like that.

What's up with this, after all that happened?

Orange hair.

A beautiful forehead.

Thick eyebrows.

Slanted eyes.

As if... never changing.

That child-like stature too.

That stature was... **similar to Kunagisa Tomo's** too.

And... it was burned into my eyes.

No matter what the fox-masked man may have said, for me it was absolute. Humanity's Strongest Contractor, Aikawa Jun — the scene of her being broken in one blow.

I wonder... What does that mean?

Magokoro was certainly outstanding in all aspects, encompassing

all sorts of talents. However, regardless of all that — that power, she didn't have that much power.

Magokoro.

What in the world happened to you?

"Ii-nii."

Eventually,

after a really long time, Moeta-kun's mouth opened.

"After saying all those grandiose things, I wasn't able to be of any use — I can only apologize."

"Ah, no — that's not….."

"Houko too, stop sulking forever and apologize to Ii-nii."

"....."

Houko-chan chose to stay silent for a while, even after that, but she eventually looked at me and said "Sorry."

"What a clown I was. Not only not being of any use, I couldn't do anything. Like I'm just a dog waiting to lose."

"As I said, that's not the case."

"From here on, please call me doggy."

"....."

As I said……

Stop trying to take your character in a weird direction.

"Well….. certainly, a lot's happened. But, even then, our objective was fulfilled — so we should be happy with what we got, in this case. You were able to settle it with just these injuries, too."

"But that person — she died."

"……Izumu-kun, huh. But that too — in the end, it couldn't be helped. In the first place, it was stranger for Izumu-kun to have lived this long..."

That being said.

There was still guilt.

No matter how much I glossed over it, it was the same.

Though it was the fox-masked man's intent to bring out Izumu-kun, the retired Izumu-kun, to the front of the stage — the one who made that happen was still me.

So Izumu-kun too...

It was like I killed him myself.

In Fukuoka, I told Izumu-kun something like 'You were thankfully able to lose safely', but at that time, Izumu-kun denied saying it wasn't a defeat. Then, now too, should I do as the fox-masked man and congratulate Niounomiya Izumu's defeat?

……..Deception.

What are you doing, getting swallowed in that idea?

There was no meaning.

None.

"How should I say this — it's lame." Said the desperately self-deprecating Moeta-kun. "This return trip is especially lame. Idiotic."

"Return trips are mostly like this."

"Maybe."

"More than that, Moeta-kun — now, how should I say it, not just about your part-time job. I will tell you just in case, but you shouldn't force yourself. Your arms are broken, so first focus on healing. In that period, I will pay for your living expenses. Of course, for the hospital bill too."

"I will gratefully let myself be spoiled by that, Ii-nii."

"I am," said Houko-chan. "Maybe for Moeta-kun, but I don't need to be hospitalized. Wounds of this degree will heal on their own if I lick them."

"…….right."

If I responded with the normal retort of 'how are you going to lick your forehead', I felt that Houko-chan would say something weird again, so I just nodded.

"Well, anyhow, you two, good work. Thank you. You two may say stuff like that, but you really helped me out. Yes, to the point I feel bad for being the only one to have done nothing. Anyway, it's not something I can do anything about on my own. In a way, having Houko-chan and Moeta-kun there was more reassuring than having Aikawa-san."

"Aikawa-san... Jun-san, huh." Moeta-kun said to himself. "Ii-nii... I talked to her a little."

".....umm. What did you talk about?"

I was a bit interested in that. Aikawa-san and Moeta-kun, the Contractor and the Grim Reaper, what kind of conversation did they partake in?

"No matter what, you can't see through her. She seems frank, and probably is really frank, but it doesn't come through."

"It doesn't come through?"

"I'm sure it's simple — simple to the point we can't compare to her. Her way of thinking is too simple, so when people like us look at it, it's conversely complex."

"……..well, I mainly agree with you on that."

"About her father too, a little." Said Moeta-kun. "I heard her talk about him a little."

"Father..."

The fox-masked man.

Saitou Takashi.

And also, Kajou Akira and Aikawa Junya.

"A mixture of hate and love — I guess."

"……."

A mixture of hate and love.

The words seemed too simple.

Though I felt like they fit.

Moeta-kun continued.

"However, in regards to that — it's the same for me and Houko. No, in the end, this kind of feeling more or less exists between all parents and their children….."

"I wonder what Aikawa-san wanted to do." I said. "Meeting her father again, the father that should have died ten years ago, that she killed herself — just what did she want to do?"

She was always searching for him.

I think those were her true feelings.

I don't think she's someone who would lie about that.

However...

In reality, if she saw Saitou Takashi...

Whether or not she would be able to do that is dubious.

"In the first place, if you asked me whether a person that soft on

her family would actually be able to kill her own father, I wouldn't be able to answer confidently. I can't affirm that I trust her unconditionally. Even that time ten years ago — she talked about it as if she hadn't acted directly."

"That person... is soft."

Houko-chan said.

"Too soft."

"....."

"At that time, when she protected Moeta-kun — she was soft enough to melt."

"Though it's thanks to that that I was saved. If I had hit the wall directly with that momentum, my spinal cord would have been done for."

"Right. If she hadn't done that, I think that the orange person wouldn't have been so overwhelming for Jun-san—"

"No, Houko-chan, that's wrong." I said. "You can say that because you didn't really see it with your own eyes. There was an absolute gap in power. It was all about power. The result was due to unquestioning brute force. Between Aikawa-san and Magokoro — there's an insurmountable wall. It wasn't a problem of mentality, it was more of a physical problem."

Though, I really couldn't believe it.

An absolute capable of denying the absolute.

An existence capable of denying existence.

Fear,

disgust,

and much more than that.

".....that orange person — she is Onii-chan's colleague that I occasionally hear about, right?"

"Yes…….. that's her, but I don't really understand."

"Don't understand?"

"I don't understand."

I nodded.

"It's too... vague. While being the Omokage Magokoro that I know, she is also an Omokage Magokoro that I don't know at all."

"You parted a few years ago, didn't you?" Said Moeta-kun. "Ii-nii thought she died, but she lived on regardless — with a few years, people change. In my eyes, someone who never changes is nothing more than a fantasy."

"A fantasy huh — maybe that's true."

However.

Not that, more concretely.

…….

Migishita Rurero, Kino-san, and Tokinomiya Jikoku the Thought Manipulator, setting aside what they did to Magokoro — with the fox-masked man's '*rather the opposite*', for someone to do something to Magokoro in the beginning — if that's the case, I could make a guess.

ER3 System.

The ultimate research research laboratory facility.

MS-2.

And, the Orange Seed.

"Well, we will meet them again anyway. Ii-nii, you just have to clarify things at the time. It's pointless to think about it. Now, as Ii-nii says, let's rest. Ii-nii too, though you weren't injured, you must be really tired."

"Aah…… yeah."

I wonder, would we meet again?

The fox-masked man said so.

We will contact you from our side.

I—

Would I just wait in fear for that?

Like a fool, just waiting?

If I was going to just wait for good luck, I might as well be asleep — but, no matter what the Worst meant, it couldn't have been anything good.

The antidote.

In any case, at least we got that.

Now, what I should do.

The way I must choose.

The path I must choose.

".....Moeta-kun. Houko-chan."

"What is it? Ii-nii, being formal." Moeta-kun said. "That doesn't suit you."

"No... I was just thinking, thank you for this case."

"We already heard that earlier. But I don't remember having done enough to deserve being thanked twice."

"Yeah…… but, well, at the very least, we can now save Miiko-san……. so, you two, you should step back now, I think."

"....."

"....."

Moeta-kun and Houko-chan — they were silent.

After a while, Moeta-kun said "Certainly,".

"If Miiko-san is saved, meddling in Ii-nii's trouble any longer would be strange."

"Yes. This was originally a problem between me and mister fox— Miiko-san was just caught up in that, and you two were too, Moeta-kun and Houko-chan. Seeing Izumu-kun dying that way, seeing him being killed that way — I really don't think that you have any need to go along me anymore."

"—I am…"

Houko-chan said.

"I am Onii-chan's slave."

"And before that, my friend."

I said.

"I can't endure seeing my friends getting hurt in front of me anymore. If this kind of thing keeps repeating, something will happen."

Rather, it might be easier.

Something happening for real.

If I went crazy, maybe it would be easier.

……..no, if I'm at the point where I'm considering that seriously, I might already be crazy.

Even then.

"However — Ii-nii, maybe we're already past the point where we can say things like that. This time Mii-nee was probably just caught

up, but if you consider that, don't you think they have no problem involving anyone from Ii-nii's surroundings?"

"Yes……. that's true."

No hesitation — rather than that, it might be that **either way is fine**. It's not worth enough to purposely avoid, to expressly not do. Either way is fine. While using Kino-san to put a disease in Miiko-san, they also gave away the antidote just as easily. Umm, how should I put it, that half heartedness — I can understand it.

He doesn't care.

He isn't interested.

It's the most... troubling.

I can't deal with it.

"Then, from their perspective, Houko-chan and I are **the same either way** too, right? Even if we choose to side with Ii-nii or not, it doesn't change the fact that we are around Ii-nii. If you say we are involved, then we have been from way back, ever since we met Ii-nii."

"……right."

That's karma.

That's destiny.

Before you realize it, you were already bound hand and foot and restricted by the string of destiny, and, without being able to move, you have no choice.

You can't choose and you can't decide.

"In the end, that's how it is."

"If every path is dangerous, then fighting the enemy fits our disposition more."

"As Moeta says," Houko-chan continues. "Arriving at this point, we can't retreat. Also, Onii-chan — even we have pride."

"……That's worthless, Houko-chan. Looking at how you were unable to stand a chance against Magokoro... that's just worthless. Pride? The pride of a *Killing Name* or whatever? Worthless. Didn't you run away precisely because of that kind of worthless thing, because you hated that fate?"

"I don't care about that. Losing is effectively worthless. The non-worthless problem is — I wasn't able to protect Onii-chan."

"....."

"I thought I said it many times. I thought I repeated it many, many, many times over. I just can't stand it — stand seeing Onii-chan getting hurt. I'm being insolent, but not being able to endure seeing your friends getting hurt isn't something limited only to Onii-chan."

"Then, we're just going in circles."

I don't want Houko-chan and the rest to get hurt.

Houko-chan and the rest don't want me to get hurt.

Then, no matter how much time passes,

We can't go forward, can we?

Even though we can't go back at this point.

Even though there's no way we can go back.

"More than going around in circles, it's a vicious circle. More than playing tag, it's match pumping. Mii-nee too, when her consciousness returns, I don't know what she'll say. Mii-nee too, though she was involved, isn't it more like she stuck her head in it by protecting Ii-nii?"

"Yes……."

"Really, just what should we do?"

Moeta-kun said, as if it wasn't his business.

It seems he was really troubled.

"I'm in a bind."

"....."

"Well, setting me aside, Houko is Ii-nii's slave, so if you tell her not to get involved, I don't think she can go against it."

"....."

I looked at Houko-chan.

Houko-chan diverted her eyes.

……..Well, if only I could say it that easily, I wouldn't have hardships. And, it's not like I don't understand what Houko-chan and Moeta-kun are saying, either.

I really do get it.

"Also — I will just add, Ii-nii, about that problem, I have one more concern." Moeta-kun said. "No, that concern in itself is already too present, and I feel it's a little late to mention it — however, in the end,

I couldn't see his appearance either, and though it's quite far from the fox-masked man or fate or things like that..."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Yamiguchi Nureginu." Moeta-kun wore a difficult expression. "**Why did he — not show his appearance before us?**"

"Why, you say……" I tilted my head. "Is that weird?"

If I remember correctly, according to Emoto-san, this time, the *Thirteen Stairs* present at the Sumiyuri Academy ruins were Emoto-san, Ichirizuka Konomi, Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami, Tokinomiya Jikoku, Migishita Rurero, Noise-kun, whom you shouldn't forget about, and Omokage Magokoro — and Yamiguchi Nureginu. However, this time, we didn't meet everyone. The *Space Creator* Ichirizuka Konomi, Tokinomiya Jikoku and, as Moeta-kun said, Yamiguchi Nureginu — we didn't meet them.

"Yes. Exactly. Of course, in this case *showing his appearance* is just a metaphor. Yamiguchi Nureginu, *Nureginu the Concealed*, doesn't show himself in front of anyone, as usual — however, I can't accept the fact that **he didn't have anything in store for us**."

"……I don't.... really get it. Wasn't it just by chance? It's not like Yamiguchi Nureginu was the only one we didn't meet—"

"In the case of Ichirizuka Konomi and Tokinomiya Jikoku, unlike Yamiguchi Nureginu, although those two didn't appear in front of us— even then, they had a reason for being here. Of course, for Ichirizuka Konomi, it was to split us up as the *Space Creator*. For Tokinomiya Jikoku… err, to restrain Omokage Magokoro."

"....."

Migishita Rurero, Kino Raichi, Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Once Kino-san's *poison* gets *infected*, there's no need to be anywhere near the target, but for technique users like Rurero-san or Tokinomiya Jikoku, being near the target must be more convenient — well, that's certainly correct.

Restraining Magokoro.

Rather, the opposite huh.

"But, Ii-nii — just Yamiguchi Nureginu, only Yamiguchi Nureginu, had no reason for being in that academy, did he? There shouldn't have

been any need for him to be there."

"Is that really the case? If you're saying that, it's the same for the Miotsukushi Sisters. Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami. Because Izumu-kun came, these two ended up not having a role, but that's just a coincidence—"

"However, the fox-masked man already predicted that Izumu-kun would probably come — rather, is there any doubt that this is something he planned? No, there's no doubt — it's very likely that the fox-masked man inserted the Miotsukushi Sisters in the *Thirteen Stairs* as a means of provoking Niounomiya Izumu. Then, it was inevitable for the Miotsukushi Sisters to be at that academy. Even if his goal wasn't fulfilled, the same went for the guide Noise and the essential healer Sonoki Emoto, if it's even the case for that emotionally unstable Doctor—"

Moeta-kun said.

"**Yamiguchi Nureginu's existence feels out of place.**"

"....."

"Since Ii-nii is unfamiliar with these kinds of things, it might not really strike home, but this kind of discomfort, if we don't quickly do something about it, the situation will evolve into something dire. Ii-nii has a habit of ignoring that kind of foreshadowing, but I don't. I am the sort of guy that cuts down the present foreshadowing."

No — a Grim Reaper.

—Moeta-kun summarized.

……..Yamiguchi Nureginu.

The assassin who won't ever appear in front of anyone.

Well, if he said it like that, it was certainly unnatural, I guess……. Since there's no way I could read the objective of the fox-masked man's actions, I expressly tried not to think about that kind of mystery — however, even if the principles of the fox-masked man's actions were unclear, that wasn't necessarily the case for his subordinates, the *Thirteen Stairs*, as well.

Yamiguchi Nureginu — Assassin.

"Ii-nii. Ii-nii — what do you think?"

"Umm….. I think that — that he probably wasn't here for me, but

the focus of his selection may have been on Houko-chan and Moeta-kun." I said what I thought. "*Nureginu the Concealed* reason for being here was the same as the Miotsukushi Sisters role as a counterplan for Niounomiya Izumu — maybe being cautious of Houko-chan and Moeta-kun, who have the highest fighting ability around me, is the normal way of thinking for the fox-masked man."

Well, I didn't know, but Houko-chan and Moeta-kun had a serious connection with the *Killing Names*, so it may have been natural to think like that. Though it was a deduction without any ground, it was probably right. Since he used Miiko-san as a way to make me waver, anyone could have predicted that the other residents of the rundown apartment would meddle in.

Saying that much, I realized.

Right…… if that's the case.

"It's probably as Ii-nii says. Maybe this time, Yamiguchi Nureginu didn't have the chance to meet us, and there's no problem if we understand it like that. However—"

Right.

That being said, however—

"**It's not necessarily the case from here on**."

"....."

"Yamiguchi Nureginu — perhaps, since Niounomiya Izumu and the Miotsukushi Sisters are no longer here, he will come straight for us. Using a *Killing Name* to deal with a *Killing Name* is the natural way of thinking. No matter what Ii-nii thinks, to us it's the same thing."

"So it's already beyond the level of just **being involved** or **sticking your head in**?"

"Setting Mii-nee and the people around Ii-nii aside, judging from what I know, aren't Houko-chan and I being incorporated as pieces of the Story? Without concern for Ii-nii's will, nor for ours."

"Not choosing… and not deciding, huh?"

It is being chosen,

And it is being decided.

"I'm beaten."

"I am indeed beaten."

"I am beaten."
When our opinions all matched,
the train came.
It was the first train.
Looking at the platform, there weren't any passengers boarding.
Rather, it was an unmanned station, without any staff.
Good grief, I shrugged.
Anyway, let's rest.
My body, brain, and mind were at their limits.
A lot of things happened — too many things.
Izumu-kun's death.
Meeting Magokoro.
About Aikawa-san.
About the fox-masked man too — let's forget about that for now.
Forget.
And rest up.
Let's rest, shall we...
"—Eh."
I escaped the hospital,
returned to the apartment,
went to Sumiyuri Academy,
left Sumiyuri Academy,
arrived at the station,
and,
in all this time,
for the first time,
my mind faltered,
my mind loosened,
And in that moment.

My back was pushed.

"—Huh, what?"
My legs didn't work.
I couldn't put any strength in my legs.
My legs were not on the ground.

My body was floating.
The train,
the train, on the railway.
Running on the railway.
Was entering the station.
It was bad.
At this rate, the railway—
on the railway,
I would fall on the railway.
Fall.
But,
my legs not being able to step means,
in the air,
a change of direction midway,
I'm not a cat.
suddenly, even if,
you say this,
there's no way I can deal—
"Onii-chan!"
My arm was pulled.
It was Houko-chan.
Houko-chan, with the strength of her entire body, with all her strength,
she pulled me back on the platform.
Pulled me.
In the air,
I was already sticking out on the railway,
my body,
was returned.
It was returned, but,
even then,
the law of dynamics.
to pull me — Houko-chan's body,
Was small.
Too small.

Setting her arm strength aside,
She didn't have enough weight.
Not enough.
Even though my weight was about average.
So, even then, if she pulled me,
me, who was in the air,
with the support, point of lever and point of action—
this time Houko-chan was,
going forward.
Forward.
Where there is no footing,
on the railway.
The train.
The horn.
The sound of the brake.
Not in time.
Not in time.
Not in time.
Not in time.
".....HOUKO!"
And.
On my back,
on my back,
when I was falling on the platform on my back,
while I screamed,
what I saw,
with both arms broken,
Moeta-kun, with both arms sealed,
Ishinagi Moeta was,
wedging himself in front of Houko-chan.
Moeta-kun and Houko-chan crashed.
There, Houko-chan's momentum was killed,
and with the shock of the crash,
backwards.
Reflected.

To the platform.
She bounced back.
Overlapping with my body.
Thump.
The sound echoed on the wound of my chest.
The inside of my body oscillated.
And, suddenly.
Suddenly.
The momentum of Houko-chan, who had bounced back;
Moeta-kun received the same amount of power,
Moeta-kun, who was already on the border of the platform,
like that,
on the line,
fell.
Fell.
He couldn't use his arms.
He couldn't climb back.
Falling on his back.
He couldn't move.
"Mm."
Moeta-kun was making a troubled face.
A mysterious face.
Then,
looking at me and Houko-chan, who stood up,
looking,
looking,
"Aah."
Then,
he showed a satisfied expression.
And,
smiling,
with his best smile,
as if fulfilled, he smiled broadly.
Houko.
You can't go against what Ii-nii tells you.

Ii-nii.
I'm entrusting Houko to you.

"Goodbye."

The worst party that was held in September.
Achieved the primary goal.
The antidote.
Miiko-san will be saved with this.
But we were not unhurt.
The damage was enormous.
One injured.
Yamiguchi Houko.
One missing.
Aikawa Jun.
Two casualties.
Niounomiya Izumu.
Ishinagi Moeta.

ACT 11 - RESTING PERIOD

YAMIGUCHI NUREGINU
ASSASSIN

0

What hurts hurts.
What hurts hurts.

1

I didn't really understand why, but she had a dark expression.

"I don't really understand why, but you have a dark expression."

I tried saying it.

It became an even darker expression.

It was amusing, I thought.

I didn't really understand why, but I thought it was amusing.

Hearing about the situation, it seemed that tomorrow, an experiment summing everything up until now would be held. I thought, hasn't this already happened a few times? However, tomorrow's experiment would be on a whole different scale than the previous ones.

It seemed she was reluctant.

"If you don't like it, just say so."

I tried demanding something from another person that I myself couldn't do.

She said she didn't like it.

I paradoxically thought it was amusing.

In reality, it wasn't really interesting at all.

Rather, you could say it was unpleasant.

But I thought it was amusing.

"If I refused the experiment, I wouldn't have any reason to be here. That means I would get disposed of. I don't have a choice in the first place," I was told in a dark tone. It was a depressing story to hear. Even though she was normally bright, only when treated as experiment or research fodder, she became low spirited — as if her battery ran out. From my perspective, that gap was mysterious and unnatural, so I found it amusing.

I liked it.

But that time, she was awfully depressed.

It looked serious, I thought.

"Then,"

I said.

"Let's flee together."

I said lightly.

I meant to cheer her up.

I was just encouraging her.

I knew we couldn't escape.

At that time, I knew it well.

I,

already,

at that time, had destroyed Kunagisa Tomo.

I had killed Kunagisa Tomo.

I knew,

knew that I couldn't do anything.

That I couldn't even run away.

No matter where I ran, it was the same.

I knew that, in the end, it was the same place.

That's why I was able to say it.

"Let's escape together, holding our hands, until the end of the world."

Hearing that,

I didn't really understand why, but she had a happy expression.

Therefore,

therefore I,

in the end, until the end,

I couldn't even apologize to her —

".....Good morning."

Since then, one week had passed.

Eighth of October, Saturday.

That day, when I woke up in the hospital I was readmitted to, Miiko-san sat next to me.

Asano Miiko.

Blue hospital gown, sitting on a pipe chair.

She was probably worn out.

But her posture was straight.

A reliable aura.

Her tough expression — it was just as usual.

"....."

"What is it?"

"Miiko-san……."

"Um?"

"Miiko-san, kiss—"

".....Smile."

A chop to the throat.

I received serious damage to my respiratory system.

"Miiko-san……. Attacks to my throat affect my life……. the sight of me coughing because of breathing difficulties is so pitiful….."

"Sexual harassment is forbidden."

"Yes……."

So strict.

I can't believe this was the attitude she showed to the person who saved her life……..

"……..You seem to be fine. That's the most important part."

"Yes."

Miiko-san nodded.

"Well, my consciousness came back a while ago, but I was only

able to move again today."

"……Is that so."

Even though Rabumi-san didn't say anything.

So she hid it.

Well, it must have just been that visitors weren't allowed.

"And Suzunashi-san? Where is she?"

"Sleeping."

"Sleeping?"

"On the bed of my hospital room."

"On the bed of Miiko-san's hospital room."

"She's a real nuisance."

"....."

What a terrible thing to say.

Even though Suzunashi-san must have been awake day and night until Miiko-san regained her consciousness……

"With her big body."

"Yeah…."

"Why is she so tall for just being Suzunashi?"

"Yeah……"

She said some absurd things.

She was strangely selfish in regards to Suzunashi-san.

Well, concerning these two… No need to say anything pointless.

These two understood each other really well.

Miiko-san didn't thank Suzunashi-san,

and Suzunashi-san didn't request any thanks.

For those two,

that kind of thing was exceedingly normal.

When she woke up,

it was normal for her to be there.

Just like what Miiko-san was doing for me now.

Mmm.

I was a bit jealous.

".....Then, are you to be discharged?"

"Nnya. My body is still really stiff. I think I can barely walk." Miiko-san said, unconcerned. "I guess I'll stay the whole month in the

hospital."

"Is that so……."

"My body is faltering."

"Right."

"Even though I was trained."

"Right."

"A shame."

"Right."

It was a weird conversation.

Rather, too ordinary.

That's right……

This kind of calm conversation, it'd been a while.

Miiko-san's pleasant distance.

It felt so nice that it was strange.

Even though this kind of comfort...

There was no way it could be forgiven.

A discomfort.

".....Miiko-san, how much do you know?"

"Umm?"

"When you woke up this time."

"Ummm." Miiko-san tilted her head. "Currently, not much. Or rather, nothing at all. Since I didn't receive an explanation from anyone, I don't really know."

"Is that so."

"But I know that Moe died."

".....Is that so."

"A shame."

"....."

"A shame."

The second one after Hime, huh.

Miiko-san said with an inexpressive face.

"So…….. what happened to Hou?"

"Ah, err... likewise, she's hospitalized here."

"Um? Really? I didn't hear about that……. Inoji, that's—"

"No, her wounds are not that serious, not something that might

affect her life. There was a big wound on her forehead, but she can hide it with her hair. She's young so it will immediately become unnoticeable. Just— umm."

"That's vague. Is it hard to say?"

"Yes…….. somewhat."

"Is it better not to ask?"

"……I will omit the details. I still haven't digested it myself. But it's not about me, it's about Houko-chan and Moeta-kun — so Miiko-san, listen carefully."

"Yes."

"Houko-chan — you see. Seeing Moeta-kun die in front of her, it was a huge shock, and her mind — it's suffering from heavy damage."

"I heard he was run over by a train." Miiko-san nodded. "After something like that, she can't possibly not change."

"Before her eyes too — no matter how strong she looks, she's still a thirteen year old girl."

"…….Yes. Well, that's right. So?"

"For the last week, she's been frantic." I said. "She's been fed tranquilizers and is bound to the bed in her room. She hit the walls, broke a window and even tried to jump out from there — it seems she has an excessive tendency towards self-mutilation."

"……"

As expected, Miiko-san was silent. Maybe she couldn't imagine Houko-chan being like that. Since she was normally such a strong child, even I couldn't.

To be honest, I hadn't yet seen that Houko-chan either. I hadn't seen her with my own eyes. This was all from Rabumi-san's reports. That's why I still wasn't fully convinced — however, her visits were even more restricted than Miiko-san's, despite having been here for a whole week, I still could not pay her a visit. She was in a situation where nobody but doctors and nurses could see her apparently.

Since even that frivolous Rabumi-san spoke with a serious face, no matter how unconvinced I was, it was probably the truth.

I guess... it was no wonder.

I mean.

From Houko-chan's perspective,

it was like she killed Moeta-kun herself.

The one who pushed Moeta-kun onto the railway,

was without a doubt,

Houko-chan herself.

Sibling.

Even though they were… siblings.

Even though they were the only two siblings for them.

"..............Heavy."

Eventually Miiko-san said while sighing.

"Hou and Moe, and even you — despite being kids, you carry such heavy things with you."

"Even you Miiko-san, you're not so old that you can treat us like kids, right?"

"Yes." She nodded. "But, for a thirteen year old girl, a relative's death, a relative's corpse, a relative's life — it's unbelievably heavy."

"My little sister too — she died when I was a kid."

"I see."

"Well, I guess it's heavy. Though people's deaths are unavoidable, they're too heavy for one person to bear. When a human dies, really — you can't do anything about it."

Really... you can't do anything.

You are too powerless.

……..No, can you really not do anything?

Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun.

Despite having died, they were alive.

And Kajou Akira was living inside Saitou Takashi.

Niounomiya Izumu died once, then once more.

And, Omokage Magokoro.

".....So Hou will be hospitalized for a while too."

"Yes, surely."

"And you?"

"My wound, well, it wasn't anything big, so I'll be fine. To the point that being hospitalized for one week is already too long. I think I'll be discharged at the beginning of next week."

"Hmm."

"Please don't doubt me, it's the truth. Just—" I instinctively looked down. "I don't really know what to do, either."

"....."

"Honestly I thought that would be the end."

Miiko-san didn't know anything.

About the fox-masked man or about the *Thirteen Stairs*.

About destiny or about the world or about the Story.

She didn't ask and I didn't say anything.

But,

she must have noticed a little by now.

That something was currently happening around me.

Hime-chan dying

and Moeta-kun dying,

they were not unrelated.

I guess she noticed.

Her instincts were as sharp as a Japanese blade.

"I don't know... I don't know what I should do, I don't know what the **other side** will do or what they want to do. It's as vague as making an enemy out of a mirage."

"Isn't vagueness your speciality?"

"I'm not good with this kind of vagueness. The vagueness I'm good at is *stagnant* — the one in this situation is more *unclear*."

Withholding the answer,

or not having an answer,

that distinction.

"Unclear, huh."

"Unidentified and ambiguous — the only thing I know is that **the other side doesn't intend to settle things in a clear way—**"

Then, what should I do?

The end of the world and the end of the Story too — if he didn't wish for an end like that, then for the fox-masked man,

for Saitou Takashi, what was the end?

Not something that concrete...

Something more abstract?

Just what...

What was he wishing for?

"Well — you're in a complicated situation."

"Yes."

"Well — I will choose to stay ignorant for now. Anyhow, at this rate, I couldn't do anything this month. Don't worry, I won't bother you anymore."

"....."

"I don't intend to drag you down any further."

"Miiko-san, that's—"

"It's fine. At that time, I shouldn't have protected you from that guy. I am, in the end, overprotective. To the point where I don't know my place."

"......Please don't say that Moeta-kun died because of that."

With just Houko-chan, it was more than enough.

More than enough.

"I won't say something like that."

Miiko-san shook her head.

"I won't say it. Even if my mouth is torn open."

"I'm relieved."

"But if by me being hurt Moe, Hou or you end up being unnecessarily hurt too, then it's better to not get hurt."

"....."

"Sorry for talking like I knew everything back then, Inoji." Said Miiko-san. "I don't think I'm in the wrong, but your stance isn't wrong either. It's correct."

"Correct..."

"No matter for whose sake they are, your wounds are yours. They're not something that anyone can shoulder in your place. I, as well as Hou, didn't understand that.

Get hurt all you want.

"I will endure that. If it hurts too much, I will suck it up."

I thought... I should no longer get hurt.

That if someone was to grieve, I shouldn't get hurt.

But, it's no good like that.
In the end, it's no good like that.
It's no good **with just that**.
Getting hurt.
Getting hurt getting hurt getting hurt.
There are things you don't understand without that.
Though you can't endure looking at others' wounds.
Though you can't endure others getting hurt.
Even then.
Without averting your eyes, without closing your eyes.
Without ever closing your eyes.
Not even blinking for an instant.
Properly looking,
properly witnessing.
You have to endure.
That's...
The difference between kindness and sweetness.
Right.

Don't be so spoiled.

Your wounds,
and others' wounds,
don't fear them.
Wounding each other.
Licking each others' wounds.
"I will grow up."
I muttered.
"No matter what anyone else thinks — I will grow up."
"....."
"I will change. It may be too late, it may be too complacent, but I will change. With my battle against you, I will grow up and change, Saitou Takashi."
Even if you said I was your enemy.
Now, you were no longer my enemy.
Now, I wouldn't say any spoiled things anymore.

To anyone.

I wouldn't be spoiled.

"I see."

Miiko-san stood up from the pipe chair.

Her legs seemed a bit wobbly.

She really wasn't in good shape.

"I don't really get it — but, well, it's fine. You're not as depressed as I thought so, I'm relieved."

"Depressed…….?"

"When Hime died, weren't you a mess?" Miiko-san said. "I thought I would console you again if you were depressed about Moe. But I didn't have to."

"Console, is it?"

"Yes."

"That…. I'm still fine."

"I see."

"It can't be helped that Houko-chan gets depressed — rather, it's natural for her to be. But, though I don't really understand it myself, it's like, in this case — I feel like it's wrong for me to grieve Moeta-kun's death."

"Umm?"

"Because Moeta-kun, in the end, he was smiling."

"In our apartment, he was one of the rare few, or rather, the only one who smiled."

Always… alone.

As if shouldering everyone else.

He was silently smiling.

"Yes. He was until the end. Also, he seemed very satisfied."

The meaning behind that smile — was understood in two completely opposite ways between Houko-chan and Moeta-kun.

However, that being said, Moeta-kun,

until the very end, like Houko-chan,

I think he was protecting the person he loved.

That's why he was satisfied.

He was filled to the brim.

"Although, I guess it's natural for Houko-chan, who was left behind. No matter what Moeta-kun thought, she can't think the same."

"I guess. If you understand that —" Miiko-san said. "Is it fine to entrust Hou to you? Honestly, at this point, it feels like I can't handle it. That kind of heavy pain... I really can't imagine it."

"Yes."

"That's why I won't stick my nose in anymore, but if you have something you want me to do, I'm always ready."

"I will take you up on that."

"When everything is over, treat me to some sake."

"Yes. At that time, let's talk about the past."

Miiko-san smiled bitterly,

and left the hospital room.

……

I collapsed my raised upper body.

I tried being in a daze.

Thinking.

Not thinking.

Sighing.

".....Tch."

We really forced ourselves.

Miiko-san and I.

Like everyday life — but unlike everyday life.

It wouldn't go on as it always had.

Miiko-san, Houko-chan and I were all close to dying.

And Moeta-kun died.

Wounds.

The pain of wounds, huh?

Painful.

Frustrating.

But, I could endure it.

I would endure it.

"I will grow up……."

For Hime-chan's sake.

For Moeta-kun's sake.

For Izumu-kun's sake.

And most importantly, for my sake.

"Right…… if I don't know what the opponent will do, I need to set something up from my side."

Since that one week.

Some wounds have healed.

Some wounds haven't healed.

The majority are wounds that can never be healed.

Then,

no more.

I will stop waiting.

I resolved myself.

Right — I can't sit around waiting, biting my fingers.

I can't wait for the other side's contact.

Changing sides.

"Yes — then, I guess…….. It might be a bit of a cheap development, but I guess I should ask that pleasant and wonderful dear friend to appear once—"

2

No matter what happens, time always passes.

The time won't go back or stop.

Advancing.

Even if it can be accelerated.

It will simply advance forward.

Just like that.

No matter how extraordinary the situation, everyday life won't disappear.

So that there is always a way to go back.

Everyday life won't disappear.

The next day.

"Gyahoooi! Runrurun!"

Rabumi-san was in high spirits, as always.

……..

Err……

How should I say it, when I was feeling down like that, having someone nearby who didn't give me time to feel down made me feel even worse…….

"It's breakfast! Eat!"

".....Thanks for the meal."

Well……. It was as Rabumi-san said before. When I thought that it was all for the sake of cheering up a patient like me, it didn't make me feel too bad.

Rice porridge.

Miso soup.

Konjac salad.

Jelly.

"Is it good? I made it myself."

"Don't lie."

It was hospital food no matter how you looked at it.

Surprisingly, Rabumi-san even tried that petty trick of putting bandages around her fingertips to imitate old manga.

Her tricks were pointlessly skillful…….

"Though, since it's my first time, I'm not that confident. Ah, but, though it looks like that, the taste isn't terrible."

"....."

I was impressed by her will to keep going with her bizarre jokes until the end.

I wanted to learn a thing or two from her.

"By the way I~i~."

"What is it?"

"Maid love!"

"What?"

"Won't your maid come today?"

"No. She just came yesterday."

"Keh. Boring."

She just blurted out her real true feelings!

And I didn't get it.

"If your maid doesn't come, I'll just feel depressed being here, so I'll go back."

"How cruel….."

"Idiot! Idiot!"

"Are you a kid?"

Rabumi-san tidied the utensils up.

She was proficient at this kind of thing.

Then, as she was leaving.

"Right, right. You can meet Houko-chan."

She said.

"Eh?"

Naturally, I was surprised.

Rabumi-san grinned.

"The visit interdiction is removed."

"Heeh…… I thought it would last longer."

"It's a removal only for I~i~."

"What?"

"Frankly, unofficial."

"....."

"Houko-chan's state became relatively better, so they toned down the monitoring. Now's your chance. Today, from 10 to 13 o'clock, it looks like there'll be a gap, so aim for that. I'll unlock the door for you."

"I'm thankful for your consideration…… But, Rabumi-san, is that okay?"

"Of course not."

"Yeah…"

"I don't know anything."

Do as you wish, said Rabumi-san.

"But… err, um……."

"What? Weren't you the one worried about Houko-chan the entire week? You pervert lolicon bastard."

".....But if someone like me, who isn't even a specialist, comes in and acts half-assedly, umm — wouldn't that be bad for Houko-chan, just as she's about to recover?"

"She isn't recovering."

Rabumi-san's shoulders drooped.

It didn't suit her.

In the first place, said Rabumi-san.

"I wonder if you can even call that a recovery."

"……..?"

"Yahn! Don't mwake me talk too much! Rabumi-sama is a cool, nihilistic, drastic and stoic nurse!"

"First time I heard such a grandiose announcement."

Rather, that's already on the level of a scam.

Also, she probably mistook 'drastic' for dry or something like that.

"Bye! If you get caught, don't give my name!"

And Rabumi-san left.

That nurse was like a storm.

And,

time passed. It was nine and a half.

It was a bit early, but I left my hospital room.

I already looked up the position of Houko-chan's room, so I knew where it was. I also remembered the way there perfectly. But, since I didn't know how the situation would turn out, I couldn't decide if I should act with some leeway.

It felt a bit annoying to move according to Rabumi-san's plan, but since I would be discharged the next day, I was in a state where I had some boredom to spare. Setting aside whether seeing Houko-chan was a good idea or not, if I had the chance, I should at least check up on her. For me, even stealthily peeking at the hospital room was fine.

"....."

Yesterday, since then.

I called Kouta-san.

Since using cellphones inside the hospital was prohibited, I naturally called from the zone set up for that.

The great thief, Ishimaru Kouta.

When I told her that Aikawa-san went missing once again, though she didn't make a racket, her mood worsened quite a bit. She kept repeating “it's not consummate, it's not consummate” many times. Imagining her struggle finding Aikawa-san, I could understand.

"It cannot be helped."

Kouta-san said.

"I guess I will start the search back up from square one."

".....Thank you for your hard work."

"This time it looks like I can reduce the area quite a lot, so I should try to comprehend the circumstances more and search for the cause. …….So? It's not like you called me just to report that to me, did you? Dear friend."

"Yes, there is one more thing I want to ask of you, Kouta-san."

".....Well, I will at least listen."

"Alongside searching Aikawa-san, there's one more person I want you to find."

"Yes, I see. Searching for a person. What's the name?"

"Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"……..The Zerozaki clan... is it?"

Kouta-san lowered her voice.

"Ummm, you see—"

"Please hold on, dear friend. Let's meet in person before you tell me the details. You are currently hospitalized, but when will you be discharged?"

"On Monday."

"Then, could you come meet me directly then? I will wait in a hotel in Kyoto on Monday, so let's meet there. I will call you on that day for the details."

—According to that.

I would tell her the details tomorrow.

I thought while walking down the hallway.

Zerozaki… Hitoshiki.

Demonic killer.

Living, huh?

Izumu-kun's will….. or something like that. I still hadn't decided how much I could trust it.

But, well, certainly.

Thinking about it, the information that Zerozaki died came from Rizumu-chan. Niounomiya Rizumu the *Carnival*'s investigation result — the report of Rizumu as a *great detective*, as requested by the fox-masked man, could not be wrong, but...

There was just one exception.

Just one exception.

Rizumu-chan's investigation was, first of all, for her *brother*'s sake. The result of the investigation must not result in any harm to Izumu-kun.

Two personalities in one body.

Rizumu-chan was just an alternative.

If Izumu-kun, if Niounomiya Izumu-kun was **trying to hide Zerozaki Hitoshiki's existence from the fox-masked man**, then there was no doubt that the result of Rizumu's investigation was *wrong*.

"Mmm…….. But."

In the first place, Izumu-kun was the one to inform the fox-masked man about Zerozaki's existence.

So that's pretty unnatural…… ah, no.

No, at that point, the fox-masked man didn't consider Zerozaki as an enemy. Maybe Izumu-kun simply talked about Zerozaki as small talk — that's possible.

Then……. what does it mean? **Izumu-kun didn't want Zerozaki to become the fox-masked man's enemy** — is that what it is?

Izumu-kun spoke like he knew Zerozaki last month and the month before that. If Izumu-kun didn't just know Zerozaki Hitoshiki, but if he had a deeper connection, it would make sense.

Not just knowing about him.

If he knew him personally.

Well, I can't think that Izumu-kun and Zerozaki were friends, but even then — maybe, perhaps,

Izumu-kun may have covered for Zerozaki.

Covered from the hands of the fox-masked man.

Then, it was possible that following me and appearing at Sumiyuri Academy was due to guilt for me, who became Zerozaki Hitoshiki's alternative, who became the fox-masked man's *enemy* in his stead.

It could be explained.

Then, maybe he was alive.

Maybe Aikawa Jun didn't kill Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

…….I didn't know.

There wasn't enough information.

And the little information there was was entangled.

Niounomiya Rizumu saying that Zerozaki Hitoshiki died.

Niounomiya Izumu saying that Zerozaki Hitoshiki survived.

I really... didn't know.

If I remember correctly, when Izumu-kun was about to go fight Aikawa-san, I said something like “you shouldn't go, the one who killed Zerozaki Hitoshiki was probably Aikawa Jun, Aikawa-san doesn't have any mercy against **people like you**” — I wonder how

Izumu-kun felt upon hearing those lines.

Just imagining it... was depressing.

Thinking about it now, I said too much.

Well anyway.

Concerning this case, there was nothing I could do. Since a *Killing Name* was involved, or rather, since the person in question was a *Killing Name*, even if I were to rely on Kunagisa, it would be hard.

Therefore, Kouta-san.

My conclusion was to rely on the unmatched Great Thief, Ishimaru Kouta.

I had to search like this first.

That being said, it was more like insurance. Whether Zerozaki was alive or not, it didn't matter at this point. Even if the fox-masked man learned that Zerozaki was alive now, he probably wouldn't try to do anything. He wouldn't designate Zerozaki as an enemy in my place. He'd be a reserve enemy at most.

Therefore, insurance.

More importantly, another approach was necessary.

This one would come after I was discharged.

After meeting Kouta-san, I would advance this plan.

Oops……

Before that, I needed to contact Kunagisa……

Now that it came down to it, I couldn't afford to not borrow Kunagisa's power, the Kunagisa Syndicate's power. That being said,

all of that was for after I'd be discharged.

Now, for now, Houko-chan—

"……Mmm?"

And.

At that instant.

A public phone set up in the phoning space further down the hallway rang.

A public phone rang.

"……?"

Errrr, can you even call a public phone……..? No, since they are technically phones, they must have a number, I guess……..? If there

was a line going from here, then it's normal to think that it could come from the other side too. However, anyhow, it was the first time I'd encountered a situation like this, so I hesitated for an instant.

In my hesitation, I decided to enter that space. Since it was early in the morning, there was no one there. There was just a very immaculate sofa, a table, and a beautifully clean ashtray.

The phone didn't stop ringing.

Persistently, the bell continued to ring.

"....."

Impossible, I thought.

I thought, but how should I say it.

The timing.

This timing...

This encounter.

The Story.

I took the receiver.

"I won't answer any questions, I will talk one-sidedly. If you say even a single word, I will hang up on the spot."

It was modulated — an artificial voice.

"My name is Yamiguchi Nureginu."

"Eighth step of the *Thirteen Stairs* — Yamiguchi Nureginu."

".....!"

Unconsciously, my voice was about to leak, so I flusteredly covered my mouth. It's not like I took what the other person said seriously, but I shouldn't make a racket in a hospital.

I looked around me.

"You don't need to be wary, I'm not within the hospital. I don't intend to deal any harm to you."

"....."

"By the way, except for my master, you are the first to hear my voice."

Yamiguchi... Nureginu.

Nureginu-san said.

"Congratulations."

"....."

To those words, I was about to unconsciously respond 'thank you very much', but I somehow held on.

"Originally, I wouldn't make any direct contact with someone like you, but — I felt that I owed you an explanation, therefore I called you. It seemed that you couldn't use your cellphone in the hospital, so excuse me for going about it this way."

He had a very polite manner of speech.

That was also the case for Houko-chan. Was the *Yamiguchi* house strict about manners?

However.

However, even then.

No matter how polite he may have been.

"I was the one to push your back the other day."

It didn't change the fact that he was an assassin.

Yamiguchi Nureginu.

Nureginu the Concealed.

"....."

"The result was slightly different from what I had imagined, but since my objective was achieved, I will call it a success."

Objective……..?

Even if the result was different, the objective was completed, then — the objective **wasn't me**?

"My objective was Yamiguchi Houko."

Nureginu-san said.

"She was a disgrace to our house."

"....."

"It was fine when she was being quiet, but — it's different if she tries to use her *power*. Completely different. Hey, *Ii-chan*-san. Yamiguchi Houko's master."

Thoroughly... polite.

Polite to the end.

But I could only hear it as irony.

Hypocritical courtesy.

"It was obvious that if I threw you off, Houko would protect you. I could see that even with my eyes closed. More than pushing Houko herself — it was an even more certain method than that. Though, I didn't think that that filthy Grim Reaper would protect Houko—"

That's the result.

And the objective—

"But, seeing her brother die in front of her, no — killing him herself would rend her beyond recovery. At the very least, it would make her unable to exert her *power* ever again. Every time she would try, the image of her brother's death would come to her mind. Therefore, my objective was completed."

Certainly—

For Houko-chan, Moeta-kun's death was a much more painful experience than just being attacked herself.

I see…….

Then, the *concern* Moeta-kun was talking about just before that was a bullseye…….. Yamiguchi Nureginu was in the *Thirteen Stairs* with Houko-chan and Moeta-kun as a target.

But……. However.

That being said, then.

What meaning does this call have?

"Young Nonsense User, have you understood that, for us, for existences like us, someone like you is an extreme bother?"

"....."

I mean.

He told me not to talk, yet still asks questions.

I was about to answer out of reflex.

"*A connection* is what mister fox would say, but, well, to be completely transparent, I don't think there are any grudges left between us." Nureginu-san said. "That time, I may have pushed your back, which led to Ishinagi Moeta dying and Yamiguchi Houko falling beyond recovery, but I want you to understand that this was my job. **I don't want to be resented by you**."

"....."

"Therefore, while I understand it is rude, the situation led me to

this call."

Obviously — Nureginu-san continued.

"I don't expect that you will immediately be able to accept what I say. Even if assassinating Houko was a mission from my master, I fully understand that it doesn't mean anything to you."

Master…….

From that way of speaking then...

Is Nureginu's master not the fox-masked man?

To push that deduction out of the way, Nureginu-san,

"I am leaving the *Thirteen Stairs*."

Said that line.

“Since I *stopped* the Grim Reaper and Houko, there's no more meaning in me remaining in that organization."

"....."

"That was my original contract with mister fox — if Houko or the Grim Reaper were to move, then I would stop them."

Stop.

That was... assassination?

At that point, I felt like I really understood the reason why Izumu-kun hated the *Yamiguchi*, the reason why Houko-chan loathed her house.

I see...

"Until now, I have assassinated a fortune teller on a strange island and handled various small jobs without saying anything, but now that my objective is complete, although I admittedly still have some personal interest, I've judged that staying near that person is too dangerous."

…….So the one who killed Maki-san too... was this person.

But, it was mysterious.

Even hearing that, nothing special happened.

Even after including Moeta-kun and Houko-chan.

No anger… came forth.

Against this person.

Aah — I thought.

This person was a tool.

He was an assassin functioning entirely as a device.

Like a knife or a gun.

There was no will there.

In that sense, the fox-masked man killed Maki-san, and the one who put Houko-chan and Moeta-kun through all that was this person's master.

Master……..

So the fox-masked man borrowed Nureginu-san from his master……..

I wonder what kind of person they are.

Since he called Houko-chan a *disgrace*, should I assume that they have some connection with the *Yamiguchi* house? No, contracts within the family should be forbidden……. Then, maybe her being *a disgrace* was just Nureginu-san's impression.

The master had his own objective...

Houko-chan.

"Aah — please stop thinking about my master, *Ii-chan*-san. Do not worry, they do not have any connection to you. Well, though they have a small connection with Houko."

"....."

"Please don't resent me."

Nureginu-san repeated.

Persistently.

"Please don't resent me. No matter what happens, please don't resent me. I'm already leaving *Thirteen Stairs* and cutting all ties with you. I swear before the gods of Heaven and Earth, I won't lay a hand on you anymore. No matter what kind of orders mister fox gives, I will not obey them. Therefore, Nonsense User-san, please refrain from using your nonsense on me. Please... don't resent me."

When killing someone with a firearm, the firearm is to blame.

A knife hurting someone is the knife's responsibility.

I think Izumu-kun said that.

Then, you don't need to worry.

You yourself should not worry, Yamiguchi Nureginu.

I will definitely not resent you.

I will not resent you.

"I don't want another coming of Niounomiya Izumu. I must continue to serve my master from now on. I can't trip because of one disgrace and one filthy Grim Reaper." Nureginu-san still continued. "That's why I will give you some information."

"……?"

Information?

"Just me leaving the *Thirteen Stairs* would probably not be enough to satisfy you, as it's just convenient for me so, well — you could call this whistleblowing."

Whistle... blowing.

…….something that Neo-san would be good at.

Betraying.

Really — they didn't choose their means of achieving their goals.

The *Yamiguchi*.

I had no anger, and I had no hatred, but…….

I guess I was a bit irritated.

It became... weighty.

Without any care for me, Nureginu-san said.

"The Miotsukushi Sisters — they are aiming for you."

"……?"

The Miotsukushi Sisters?

Miotsukushi Misora... Miotsukushi Takami?

The two in that buddhist attire?

"It seems that those two think that they embarrassed themselves in front of mister fox. Though it was Niounomiya Izumu's doing, since that Niounomiya Izumu is now dead, their anger turned on you."

"……"

Hey hey……

Don't make me an outlet for your emotions.

That's crazy talk.

"Therefore, those two distanced themselves from mister fox's directions and are now moving alone. Mister fox tried to stop them, but it was probably useless. They will surely appear before you in due time."

Nureginu-san made a slightly weird breathing sound.

Maybe… maybe he was laughing.

"Those two have a lot of pride — their pride is the only thing they have a full person's worth of each. They probably can't face mister fox now. Also, it looks like Konomi the *Space Creator* teased them a bit. A woman's jealousy is really scary."

"....."

"No, what's scary are women themselves maybe?"

Anyway, Nureginu-san said.

"You should be careful. Although they are from a branch family, professional killers are still professional killers — though the Miotsukushi Sisters are young, the only reason they couldn't do much to you the other day was because of Niounomiya Izumu, be careful not to forget that. On the topic of how you will deal with professional killers now that you don't have Houko or the Grim Reaper — though I am somewhat interested, well, not getting too invested would be in my best interest, in my master's best interest."

Hmmm……

The Miotsukushi Sisters, huh……. If those two really did begin to move independently from the fox-masked man, it was certainly a pain. Even though, while they were acting under mister fox, their actions were unpredictable and ambiguous, they were still restrained in a way, and they could still be dealt with.

When a professional killer acts like one, it's always a pain.

I was no longer playing in my field.

It was the opponent's ring.

That day, at that station, like what Nureginu did to me, to Houko-chan and to Moeta-kun — if they came after me with such **a duty**, they were still pros.

There was no way I could deal with them.

It was bad……

"....."

Rather, fox-masked man.

Please manage your subordinates properly.

Including Nureginu.

Despite having charisma, you really aren't popular……

"In truth, I wanted to tell you a lot more. Like the current location of the fox-masked man or the state of the Orange Seed and Aikawa Jun. But if I tell you that information, I would end up being resented by the *Thirteen Stairs* instead. I do not want that. I will not take a stance."

A stance.

Balance.

Equilibrium huh.

"Well, if I have anything else left to say... let me see. Yes, apart from the Orange Seed, among the *Thirteen Stairs*, you should be wary of Ichirizuka Konomi and Migishita Rurero. Since they are women. They are strongly attracted to mister fox."

"....."

"And if you want to collapse the *Thirteen Stairs*, Utage Kudan or Emoto Sonoki would be a good start. Despite being Kudan (TL : the name means ninth step), the fourth step Utage Kudan has already been dismissed a few times by mister fox. It seems she is someone with no loyalty. As for Emoto Sonoki — well, since you already met her, I don't need to say anything more."

Nureginu-san stopped his words there. Maybe he was waiting for my reaction. Though I can't imagine how he would check the reaction of someone who can't speak.

"It was a long call, then, I will excuse myself now. Dear young Nonsense User-san. I absolutely don't care who will win between you and mister fox, but I will wish you good luck."

"**For you…**"

I...

I said.

"**What is the world's end, Yamiguchi Nureginu-san?**"

"....."

I thought there would be no answer.

Following his first affirmation, he would just hang up the phone.

I thought that.

But, after some silence,

Nureginu-san answered.

"**My master's death**."

And with that,

the call ended.

The line was cut.

Only a robotic noise was left.

I returned the receiver.

There was still nobody in the phone space.

I looked at the clock.

It was ten.

I needed to go.

I needed to go to Houko-chan's hospital room.

I didn't have time.

The world's end.

Kino-san wasn't interested.

Emoto-san wished for it.

And for Nureginu-san, it was one human's end.

……That reminded me, in the end, I couldn't hear Noise-kun's opinion. That being said, the answer of someone without a name like him, it was like I'd already heard it.

I feel like dying — that was it.

Well, setting that aside.

With that, both Noise-kun and Nureginu-san have retired from *Thirteen Stairs*. Disregarding the first step Kajou Akira, the current number of subordinates under mister fox was ten.

Ten people, huh?

…….

It didn't really feel like it reduced.

No matter how, thirteen people was too many.

Make it like the Four Heavenly Kings.

Since he wasn't popular.

"....."

While I was thinking,

I arrived at the hospital room.

The door of the room Houko-chan was hospitalized in was

unlocked by Rabumi-san, so I only needed to pull it sideways.

And,

Houko-chan was,

On the bed.

"……Houko-chan."

In a patient gown, with bandages around her forehead.

Houko-chan, whose upper body was raised,

had awfully empty eyes.

Her body was trembling.

Grasping tightly onto the sheets .

…….I understood what Rabumi-san had said.

Could you really say she had recovered when she was like that?

If it was like this, she might have been better off when she was struggling desperately.

Yamiguchi Nureginu.

He had certainly... achieved his objective.

Looking at that Houko-chan, once again, I could confidently believe it.

"Houko-chan."

I tried to call out to her once.

Houko-chan didn't respond.

Without any sign of reaction, her body was trembling.

As if she was cold.

As if she was in a world below freezing point.

Cold... frightened.

As if she was scared.

As if there was nothing she could rely upon.

Scared, freezing.

"Houko-chan!"

I approached Houko-chan and grabbed hold of her small shoulders, strongly turning her towards me. That may have been too rough and lacking in care for a patient, but I had no other way to make Houko-chan face me.

Houko-chan,

"Hih!"

She screamed.

And confirmed me.

"O……. Onii-chan."

"Yes."

"……Onii-chan."

"……."

Houko-chan,

making a very dismal face,

tightly.

She clung to me.

It almost looked like a ramming attack.

Her small body.

Grabbing my clothes strongly.

With her nails scratching into me, she grabbed me.

Her head,

the wound on her forehead, she pressed it on me.

"Ugh…….. Uuuuuuuuugh."

She groaned.

"Nonsense user — Onii-chan."

"……Yes."

"I…….. for a week, was pretty patient."

"……."

"You may not think that, bu-but, even then, in my own way, I think I shouldn't grieve the fact that Moeta… that Moeta died."

Houko-chan... was shaking.

"I thought it was fine like that and restrained, restrained myself."

"—Yes."

All of it.

I see then, all of it was to restrain herself. The actions that looked like self-mutilation, the rampaging — all of it was to restrain herself.

To endure… the pain.

It was probably necessary.

"But. That's why."

Houko-chan said.

"Can I cry now?"

"Yes."

"...!"

She grasped even tighter.

She didn't say anything, not even bawling or moaning,

Just letting tears flow, wailing silently.

Me too, silently,

I moved my hands around Houko-chan's back.

"Moeta was... by me..." Houko-chan said while weeping. More than saying that to me, she was saying it to herself. "I killed him."

"..."

"Not, because of me, I, with my hands, pushed him... I, made Moeta, fall on the railroad."

"..."

"I was—I did. I did!"

…….Aah.

Though it was too late, I understood.

Thinking back with what Nureginu-san said earlier in mind, unlike me or Houko-chan, who didn't divert our eyes from the railroad — Moeta-kun, looked up at us upon falling, perhaps he could have seen it.

Behind my back.

The one who pushed my back, Yamiguchi Nureginu.

I found it strange.

Though his arms were broken, Moeta-kun still may have been able to avoid that train — I found it suspicious that he didn't try.

But, if he had seen Yamiguchi Nureginu behind my back, Nureginu-san whose appearance has never been seen by anyone but his master, *Nureginu the Concealed*...

I'm sure he must have foreseen it.

He was… a clever boy.

If he died,

Houko-chan wouldn't have to be killed.

He understood it.

Therefore, he didn't struggle.

And made a satisfied face.

At the end, showing us such a smile.

Looking fulfilled.

Moeta-kun...

In two senses, he was protecting Houko-chan.

First, from the train, by reflex.

Then, from Nureginu-san, after consideration.

"I-I was, I was…… Onii-chan."

"....."

"Onii-chan….. Nonsense user Onii-chan…… anything, any…" Houko-chan got stuck on her words. But forcibly, with a small voice like an insect's cry, she continued. "Anything, I will do anything you want — so please, don't abandon me."

"....."

"I only have Onii-chan now."

Houko-chan continued monotonously.

"Though I am useless……. though I killed my brother……. though I am stupid, even then, I will live for Onii-chan's sake — so please, don't throw me away."

As if she was Emoto-san.

Emotionally unstable like Emoto-san.

However, since I know the normally strong Houko-chan,

I can't look at her like this.

"Please. Please…… have pity on me."

And,

Houko-chan continued to cry in silence.

Like a ghost, she was sobbing.

A child.

This girl is still... a child.

A mature thirteen year old — you can't just ignore it with those words.

That obvious fact,

I finally realized it.

It hurt.

I'm sure that for Houko-chan,

this was her first wound.

What was I thinking?

Did I think that Houko-chan was strong?

When Houko-chan proclaimed 'I can't stand looking at you getting hurt, so I will choose a path so that I get hurt', how could she use the strength to endure that as a ground to believe it?

She just couldn't endure looking at it.

She couldn't look at it.

She didn't have any grounds.

Her body just moved before she could think.

Because she didn't know pain yet.

Because she was at an age where she didn't know the pain of wounds.

A girl.

Thirteen years old.

Aah, then...

This was me.

The me of... the time I broke Kunagisa Tomo.

She was the same as me.

Rampaging, not being allowed to grieve.

Just blaming herself.

Being abandoned by everything.

It was me.

The old me who couldn't be saved.

The me who couldn't be saved by anyone.

The me who didn't save anyone.

The same me.

Then, without a doubt, pity is the right word.

"—It will be fine."

I, strongly,

so strongly that it must have been painful, hugged Houko-chan.

"I will always be at Houko-chan's side."

".....Onii-chan."

"I won't let Houko-chan go. I will protect Houko-chan. I like Houko-chan a lot. I love Houko-chan."

Words came out naturally.

I wanted to help Houko-chan.

I didn't want her... to do the same as me.

I couldn't make her do it.

"Also, you must not misunderstand — Houko-chan doesn't have just me. It would be too unfair for me to be the only one for Houko-chan. It wouldn't be enough at all. Then it wouldn't be equitable. Miiko-san and Nanananami and Koutoumaru are all here for Houko-chan. Everyone thinks you are necessary. That you are irreplaceable."

"....."

"That's why — why you can't talk about yourself like that. Don't look down on... someone important to me."

I love you.

Once more, I repeated it.

"Onii-chan—"

Houko-chan raised her face.

With all those tears, her beautiful face was a mess.

Frail, and pitiful.

I couldn't look,

but I couldn't avert my eyes.

"Please — don't…. hate me."

"Of course!"

I,

I yelled.

"That's — completely impossible."

"……Ah."

Houko-chan, suddenly, in an unbelievably quick motion, took her hands off of me, moved away, laid on the bed, covered herself with the sheets and hid herself.

……?

For an instant I couldn't understand that action.

But,

"Th-thank you very much."

After hearing that from inside the sheets,

aah, she was bashful.

I understood.

She must have been thinking that she'd exposed a shameful sight.

I honestly thought she was cute.

"I-it's really just for now."

"Eh?"

"This me is just for now."

"....."

"I will immediately return to how I was."

"........I…. I see."

That was good.

I was relieved.

Right — it was fine like that.

Houko-chan must have been like that.

She could not be like me.

There shouldn't be anyone like me.

"Onii-chan." Then, Houko-chan said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"......For now, please rest well. Resting is important too."

"....."

"But when I need help, I will definitely ask you. At that time, please be useful to me."

"—No need to tell me."

Showing her face from the sheets, Houko-chan nodded.

Strongly, she nodded.

"I will do my best for you."

"Yes. I can't wait for those seven years to pass."

"....."

"Just joking. Then, I will come back again. Take care."

I felt regret, as I wanted to say more, but I didn't have a lot of time, so I only said that.

Houko-chan lightly swayed her hand,

and I left the room.

Closed the door.

Looked up at the ceiling.

Aah……

Take care, huh?

That reminds me, I'd only ever been visited by Houko-chan, so

visiting her, it was the first time.

Hmm……..

It really didn't fit me…….

But, do your best.

That's where you must hold out, Houko-chan.

Don't become like me.

Your wound is only yours.

"……..Though — it's nonsense."

I must have been really tired, as my knees gave in.

With a sigh.

I leaned on a nearby wall.

"Yaay."

"……."

Rabumi-san was crouching right next to me.

With a mischievous look.

"……..What are you doing?"

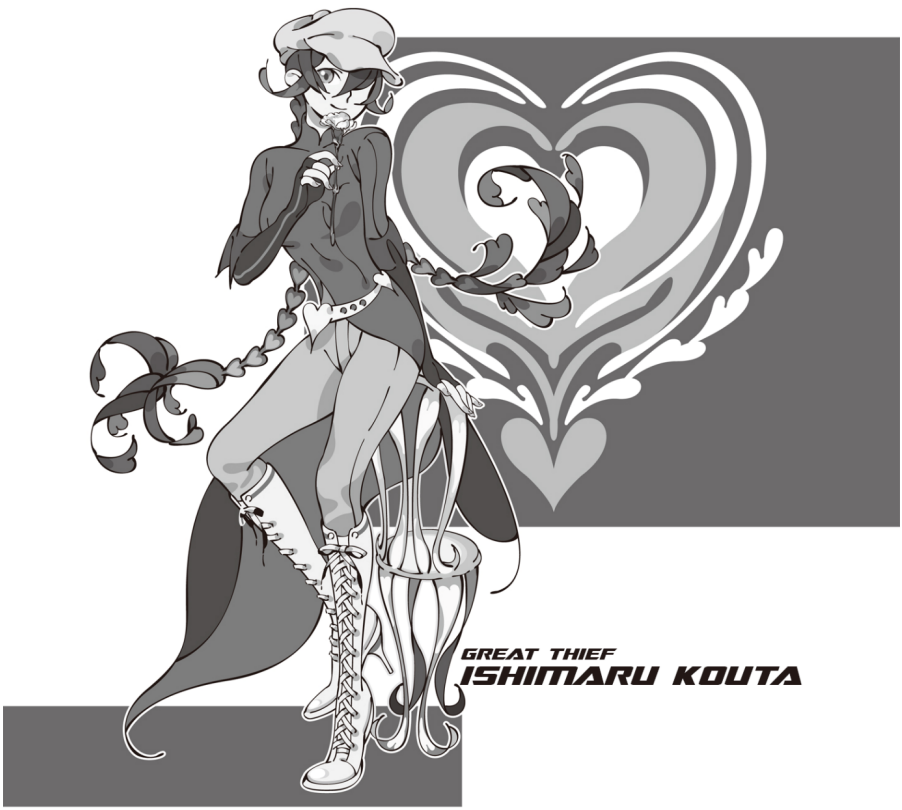
"What a nice story…… Big sister is moved."

"……."

She eavesdropped on us.

What an unpleasant ally.

ACT 12 - INSURANCE AND DEFENSE



GREAT THIEF
ISHIMARU KOUTA

0

Teacher, I'm not feeling well.

1

By the way,

there was one problem I'd been neglecting.

That was Chiga Hikari.

The other day, Aikawa-san pointed out that the twenty-seven year old maid, who came for the last third of September, was not Chiga Hikari but, in fact, Chiga Teruko.

Raising numerous points, she claimed that. Well, at the time, I'd also thought that it might be the case, that it was surely the case — but in October, when she came to bring me clothes or take care of me in other ways, I began to feel that it might not have been the case.

Hikari-san might in fact have been Hikari-san, Chiga Hikari, I came to think that way.

Actually, those triplets have been vague from the start.

Overlapping with each other,

they were blurred triplets.

They were indistinct triplets.

No matter who was who, there wasn't much of a difference.

Also, in the first place, even if it was pointed out after the fact that Hikari-san was Teruko-san, it didn't mean much. No, not that it didn't

mean anything. If that were the case, Hikari-san — Teruko-san may, like the old story of The Grateful Crane, have wanted to go back to Wet Crow's Feather Island as soon as possible. Well, even if she couldn't go home because of that, if she got found out, there wouldn't be any more reason for her to act as Hikari-san, so she would obviously return to her silent, inexpressive and unfriendly attitude. She, who didn't speak to anyone and didn't listen to what anyone said; her usual self. Not to quote Aikawa-san, but even if she was Teruko-san, I still wished for her to continue acting like Hikari-san. Of course, Teruko-san was fine as herself, but in terms of living together, Hikari-san was clearly more preferable. In that case, there was no need to forcibly make her go back with logic.

Therefore.

She was still Chiga Hikari-san in my eyes.

Well…….. I was already carrying numerous problems. Just this once, resolving it like that could be forgiven; to choose not to resolve it at all.

Holding on the conclusion.

That kind of vagueness was my speciality.

A sensation I was used to.

But a somewhat nostalgic feeling.

So, therefore—

"For now, congratulations on being discharged."

said Hikari-san.

Since maid clothes would stand out in the hospital, she was in plain clothes.

Tight jeans and a striped shirt.

Her hair was parted in two ways on both sides.

……

Yaaahn.

"Then let's go, master."

"Yes……. I will be in your care."

"Would you like to go back to the apartment first?"

"Yes. It would be better to go straight there."

"Understood."

Said Hikari-san as she took my bags, left the hospital room, and guided me. It looked like she already took care of the procedure for being discharged at the reception. I was really bad at that kind of paperwork, so it was sincerely a great help.

After thanking the doctor that took care of me and, to be polite, Rabumi-san, we left the hospital and headed towards the parking lot.

Fiat 500.

Miiko-san's car — though recently it was almost exclusively meant for my private use.

Hikari-san went to the driver's seat without hesitation.

I went to the passenger seat.

"A hotel in Shinkyogoku, right?"

"Yes."

"Around Sanjou?"

"Exactly."

"So again, a private conversation in a hotel."

"So it seems."

"Hotels are nice."

"Right."

"Then."

Hikari-san started the car.

I would no longer ask about the unlicensed driving.

"Are your wounds already fine?"

"Yes. My body healing seven times faster than normal people’s is one of the few things I can boast about."

"Your mind is also seven times more stubborn, isn't it?"

"Maybe." I shrugged jokingly. "Though I am a man that gets hurt seven times more than normal. In both body and spirit."

"That's good."

"For about one week, I'll restrain my eating habits somewhat. But after that, I should be completely fine."

"That is what’s most important."

Hikari-san smiled like an angel.

Fuu……..

It was like my only bit of respite.

Thinking about the Great Thief I was about to meet, I was close to fainting.

"There is no greater delight than master being alright — how much of a risk do Asano-san and Yamiguchi-san have?"

"Yes. They will finally rest for a while. Miiko-san and Houko-chan will be staying hospitalized for the entire month. Houko-chan's wounds aren't that serious, but her mind is still unstable. Miiko-san too, even though she's no longer in critical condition, her body is still hurt all over."

To begin with, from what I heard from Rabumi-san after the fact, she was forcing herself quite a lot when she visited my room the day before yesterday. She said Miiko-san could barely walk, and a normal person wouldn't have been able to.

In her own way, she was not normal.

But, that being said.

"It's terrible."

Hikari-san said.

She had a sad expression.

Living together with me meant, of course, that she had made a connection with everybody at the apartment — for Hikari-san, Miiko-san and Houko-chan weren't strangers anymore.

It wasn't really to cheer her up, but I told Hikari-san,

"No — Well, you could say they are safe now. For a while, for a few months, they won't be out in the front line. From the *enemy's* viewpoint, there is no meaning in attacking them now. Thinking about it that way, retiring now is the best thing to do."

"I see. That's right."

"It should take about half a year for Miiko-san to train her body back, and Houko-chan — well, she probably won't be able to fight again."

As Yamiguchi Nureginu said.

And, I was sure, as Moeta-kun had planned.

And it was probably fine like this.

"By the way, Hikari-san, the real identity of Houko-chan and Moeta-kun……. Rather, the fact that they are *Killing Names*, didn't you

realize?"

"No? I'd noticed."

"....."

Then……. tell me.

Always, every single time.

Well, setting that aside.

Hikari-san said distinctively.

"From my perspective, I am still interested in Aikawa-san. Missing once again."

"Yeah……. I guess."

The fox-masked man — Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun.

A father and daughter meeting for the first time in ten years. That being said, I couldn't think they had any catching up to do, nor that they had any heinous things to say to each other.

What was he planning?

What wasn't he planning?

Though I felt like it was just… a whim.

"She is not someone we should worry about, is what I said before, but with the situation being what it is, and the opponent being who he is — even if it's Aikawa-san, I still end up worrying."

"Right — huh, wait."

That reminded me.

Until now, I let it slide without finding it unnatural.

"Hikari-san, you call Aikawa-san by her surname?"

"Eh? Aah. Yes. What about it?"

"'What about it'……..?" Hikari-san, who said that, was naturally confused. "Aikawa-san hates being called by her surname, doesn't she?"

".....?"

Hikari-san was puzzled.

"Err, only enemies call her by her surname……."

"I have never been told that."

"....."

Huh?

……..What did that mean?

Hikari-san, rather, Iria-san and the others — their relationship with Aikawa-san shouldn't be this shallow, right? It had already been established for a few years.

So what did it mean?

Did she just miss the chance to do so?

"Is that something important?"

"……..No. Well, I think it might be relatively trivial, but—"

I thought that, but — it was weird. This kind of small inconsistency was what always led me to failure in the end. Even I had learned that much, however, it not being that important was certainly correct.

Ummm.

Maybe she didn't say it to everyone?

"Even you call Aikawa-san by her last name, don't you? Or maybe, does master think that Aikawa-san is an enemy?"

"No…….. it's not that. Well…….. umm, right. I don't think it's something to worry over."

Answering that, I looked at Hikari-san and thought about something a little different. Rather than something else, it was the continuation of what I thought about earlier. But anyhow, the achievement of wounds, or maybe the irony of fate might fit, but with that, Houko-chan and Miiko-san were able to exit this case — to exit the story of the fate between Saitou Takashi and me, so the sacrifice worked in the end — but that only means that the next one in danger would be the one currently driving this Fiat, Hikari-san.

Though it might have been Teruko-san.

No matter who she was, in a physical sense, she was the closest existence to me now. No one can argue against that.

She'd blended in before I knew it, and I'd already begun to think of her being here as obvious, but thinking normally, she should go back to the island as soon as possible.

At the very least, for her own sake.

Though I'd been thinking that at first, now I felt really grateful about her presence. When I'm too busy with something, I even forget how to simply *live*, and Hikari-san supported me well on that front.

Supported me,

and carried me.

I was grateful.

I'd been in her care a lot during my hospitalization.

Even now.

I was being helped in this situation.

Though it was not clear if she was Hikari-san or Teruko-san, a part of me didn't want to make that clear……

The Grateful Crane.

However, that being said,

Hikari-san probably really wanted to leave.

For Hikari-san,

the world was only that Wet Crow's Feather Island. So in that sense, Nureginu-san's view and Hikari-san's view had a lot in common.

Though their worlds were different, their thinking was the same huh.

Of course, for Hikari-san too, she was here by order of her **master**, and not because she wished to, so it might have been wrong for me to complain about that.

But, at some point, I should properly get to the bottom of that……

Well, including Hikari-san,

my surroundings...

Assuring security around me was important.

For that reason, I understood well that I shouldn't spare my efforts this time from both Houko-chan and Miiko-san's cases, as well as Moeta-kun and Izumu-kun's.

The security of my surroundings came back around to my safety.

Let's comprehend it like this.

Not as lip service, but on top of the egoistic understanding.

I must properly protect it.

"You worry too much, master."

And,

Hikari-san said to my thinking silently.

"It has already been more than half a month since I started serving master, but — master has a tendency to think too seriously about

everything."

"Serious? Me?"

"Yes." Hikari-san nodded. "It may be rude, but I thought that master was more frivolous."

"I am… frivolous."

"Then maybe I should say you put too much load onto your shoulders."

"Load... onto my shoulders."

"You should relax more. I think seven or eight times the load is enough in master's case."

".....Am I just clumsy in the end?"

"If that is the best method for master, I will not insist on it. But, if you want to relax or rejuvenate, please call me. Unskilled I may be, I will do my best." Hikari-san said, smiling. "Though it has been a long time, I am good at pleasing and relieving men."

"Hmm…… is that so?"

…….

Wait.

……..Was I being seduced?

Was I being tempted!?

"Hi-Hikari-san."

"Ah. We've arrived."

Hikari-san pulled the brakes in front of the hotel.

I was suddenly pitched forward.

……..It was a beautiful shoulder throw.

……..

Certainly……. I may have been able to relax.

"Then, I will go park the car in the parking lot, so don't worry and take your time, master."

"......I will do that." I opened the door and got off the driver's seat. Since I sat on the right, I was a bit nervous. "But I'll just make a request, so it shouldn't take that much time."

"Understood."

"Then."

Closing the door, seeing Hikari-san off,

I looked at the big hotel.

Ishimaru Kouta,

the hotel chosen by Kouta-san.

The diplomatic hotel near Shinkyogoku.

"....."

Two months ago.

The hotel I'd been called to by Assistant Professor Kigamine.

The same hotel I'd been called to.

It's not like it all began there.

The beginning in itself had taken place way before that.

But,

even then, that hotel was one of the focus points.

For the world.

For the Story.

The first day of August was a focal point.

Though I thought it was by chance.

I don't think Kouta-san had any reason to expressly choose that hotel, so it was probably just a coincidence, but I still ended up feeling a strange connection…… The meeting place was also the tea room on the first floor…… That being said, it was too subtle to be one of that ill-natured Kouta-san's pranks. Unlike Hikari-san, who was backed by the Akagami Conglomerate, I couldn't think the same of the independent Great Thief, Ishimaru Kouta, but she probably hadn't picked it at random, either……

I had a bad feeling.

Thinking that, I entered the hotel,

ignored the front,

and went straight to the tea room.

Kouta-san — she was already there.

Denim all over her body.

A hunting hat.

High laced boots.

Puffing her cheeks like a child, she seemed discontent and highly displeased.

Maybe she was not in a good mood.

…..Don't lose your nerves.

That being said, if I kept wandering around the entrance of a tea shop like that, I might get called out by a waiter, so, restraining my fright, I headed towards where Kouta-san sat.

For Assistant Professor Kigamine,

Where had I been seated again?

I didn't remember that much, huh?

"…….My, dear friend." Kouta-san was the one to call out to me first. "You look well. How consummate."

"Kouta-san too, you look to be in quite a good mood."

"Does it look like that?"

"No, sorry. I got carried away."

While I apologized immediately upon meeting, I sat in front of Kouta-san. Since a waiter came, I ordered a coffee. As if exchanging a promise, as if it were an implicit understanding, until that coffee arrived, not a word had been uttered between me and Kouta-san.

I took a small sip of coffee.

"……However."

I looked around.

Since it was noon on a weekday, the clients were sparse.

Though they were sparse—

"Still, how should I say it, wouldn't it have been better to meet up in a closed room?"

"That would just be useless, temporary peace of mind, dear friend. It is clear that, even if we just spoke a bit, all of your actions would end up leaking to **the other side**. Therefore, being wary would just be tiring."

"But……."

Certainly, since even the time I spoke to Hikari-san in a hotel owned by the Akagami Conglomerate, though it took a while, it ended up reaching the fox-masked man's ears.

"It's just, I don't know about being that careless."

"That's why it is fine. If we're careless, the more careless we are, the better. 'Hide a tree in the forest' — this kind of unwise expression

doesn't work with the Great Thief. If it were me, I would hide the tree in front of the public, dear friend."

"……Well, I can't go against you."

I was the one who wanted to request something.

Also — at least, the spy from *Thirteen Stairs*, Yamiguchi Nureginu of the same house as Houko-chan, is no longer my enemy. Maybe the risk concerning that has lowered a bit.

"So — well, since it's Kouta-san, I think you already understand most of the situation happening around me, but—" Aikawa-san said she heard it from Kouta-san too, so I could avoid explaining the details. "—even if Aikawa-san has gone missing again, honestly, I'm in a bind."

"So, are you saying that finding the demonic killer Zerozaki Hitoshiki is necessary and essential to break off that deadlock-like situation? Dear friend."

"Rather……"

I felt some thorns in her words.

It pricked.

Though I could get it.

"It's... for insurance, to be honest."

"Insurance?"

"The person currently opposing me — well, it's Aikawa-san's father, Saitou Takashi….."

"Yes. I am aware."

"It seems that, at first, it wasn't me, but Zerozaki Hitoshiki that he intended to make his enemy. Though it may not have been something as concrete as a plan. Regardless, because Saitou Takashi was searching for *Zerozaki Hitoshiki*, he ended up finding me."

"I see. Even I didn't know the situation around that, dear friend. That *fox* being alive is already a surprise, but why would he make an ordinary person such as you his enemy? I can't fathom it."

"Yes."

"Although, at this point, it is dubious whether we can call you an amateur or ordinary person."

"I too came to find that setting absurd recently. So, what should

we do, Kouta-san? If you're going to search for Aikawa-san again, could you search for Zerozaki Hitoshiki while you're at it?"

".....That is not 'while you're at it' at all, dear friend. My workload would simply double." Kouta-san seemed really irritated. She didn't even try to hide it. "It is like being told to go to the beach while on your way to the mountain. Except, if there was any tight connection between Zerozaki Hitoshiki and Aikawa-san—"

"It's not like there isn't any. In May, those two fought at least once, probably twice even."

"....."

Kouta-san went silent.

That too — did she not know it?

I thought that she might have known.

".....I want to ask for reference." Eventually, Kouta-san said, while pressing her head with her index finger, as if she had a headache. "What kind of impression do you have of the Zerozaki clan?"

"Err……"

Faced with Kouta-san's question, I simply repeated what I'd heard from the fox-masked man and Moeta-kun. Treating their family exceedingly well, a group of demonic killers killing without any objective. Kouta-san looked awfully fed up as she sighed, followed by a scornful laughter.

".....That impression is too soft for the Zerozaki clan. Though it is correct, it is not the whole truth. The idea that it is simply a group of friendly demonic killers is completely lacking, dear friend."

"Haaah……."

Certainly, that was just speaking with words. For someone with actual fighting experience, like Kouta-san, it really was just an armchair theory. A carefree opinion from a safe place. That being said, I'd met Zerozaki without having any idea that he was part of such an absurd clan, so my first impression differs from other people's to a certain degree.

"That reminds me, I remember someone fearlessly naming themselves a so-called Zerozaki Itoshiki."

"Ahh, yes, there was such a person."

Kouta-san nodded curtly.

It seems she didn't want that topic to be touched on.

Anyhow, Kouta-san fixed her posture.

"Even if she is Aikawa Jun, her fighting a member of the Zerozaki Clan — it's not a rumor that could spread around casually. The only ones who know about that are probably Aikawa-san, that Zerozaki Hitoshiki guy she fought, and you."

"Is that so."

In reality, Kunagisa had been nearby when we talked about that, so she knew, but it was not something that I needed to expressly comment on.

"Fighting Aikawa Jun, huh……. did he survive?"

"There's word that he died then, or that he managed to survive. I heard both."

Furthermore, *from the same person*.

Since it was complicated, I kept that a secret.

"Hmm…….. Well, if those are the circumstances, that Zerozaki Hitoshiki person…….. could become a useful hint to search Aikawa Jun — maybe."

"Yes……. he would be **a hint for Aikawa-san and for Saitou Takashi**."

"Do you have any guesses?"

"Houston — the ER3 System in Houston, Texas is, well, really suspicious, I guess."

"How vague."

"It is vague."

"How random."

"It isn't random."

".....Well, I will look into that as well, just in case. However." Kouta-san glared at me. "The objective — what is it? Your objective. Asking me to search for Zerozaki Hitoshiki, I don't understand your reason behind it."

"....."

"In the first place, what is the connection between you?"

"An Alternative it seems."

"What?"

She let out a hysteric voice.

Well…….. if you didn't know about the fox-masked man's philosophy, you couldn't understand what I'd said. Even if you did, most people wouldn't get what he was saying either.

"It's not like we're friends, but we were associated back in May."

".....Maybe that is it? He didn't want to be Aikawa-san's father's, Saitou Takashi's, enemy, so he put up a substitute and fled? Dear friend."

"If he could do something like that, I'd give him full marks, since that's the ideal scenario, but it'd be impossible to see that far ahead. However, it could serve as an **upset**."

"An upset."

"Therefore, insurance." I said. "Also — the thing that is called destiny. In this case, destiny is very important. While, for me, destiny is nothing more than random chance—"

Like, this hotel.

Where I first talked to Assistant Professor Kigamine.

Like this hotel.

"—for Saitou Takashi, that's definitely not the case. Destiny exists without a doubt. If it doesn't, he'll create it. He's that kind of person."

"Outrageous, he is."

"Outrageous, yes. But, because of that — there is one for sure. **A link between Saitou Takashi and Zerozaki Hitoshiki**. At the very least, something that Saitou Takashi would call a link — something that should exist and which cannot be shaken."

"Cannot be... shaken."

"Therefore, an upset."

At the very least, it was enough of a breakthrough to serve as insurance, and there should've been something that made me confident enough to think that.

Between Saitou Takashi and I, between the Nonsense User and the fox-masked man, even before Aikawa Jun — there was the connection of Omokage Magokoro. Similarly, between Zerozaki Hitoshiki and Saitou Takashi, between the demonic killer and the fox-masked man,

in addition to Aikawa Jun, there should've been something.

There must have been something.

For the fox-masked man.

If that wasn't the case, his logic would break down.

The breakdown of the world.

The breakdown of fate — the breakdown of the Story.

If I was Zerozaki Hitoshiki's alternative,

it must have been like that.

"Then — **we can use that connection**. That connection, which is already unnecessary for Saitou Takashi, depending on how we use it, can become a weapon. That's what I think."

".....How typical of you."

Kouta-san said, as she looked part fed up and part impressed.

"First the weak point — right?"

"Yes."

"Forgetting his enemy, not being aware, deciding it unnecessary; using that as a weapon to break through — it is truly befitting of you, dear friend."

"My weapon — it was and forever will only be my words."

"That's nonsense, isn't it?"

"Well, it is."

".....Understood." Kouta-san nodded. "As long as you are fine with the investigation of Zerozaki Hitoshiki only being on the side of searching for Aikawa Jun, I will sign the contract."

"Contract, huh."

"Stealing that woman's title is consummate too."

Kouta-san smiled boldly.

I,

purposely stayed silent, before offering words of gratitude.

"Sorry to bother you."

"I don't mind. That debt will eventually be promptly repaid."

"Yes, once everything's over and we're both fine, I'll do anything you want then… Honestly, I'm relieved. Not all of it is gone, but I feel like I've taken off half the baggage I carry. Because, if you refused, I wouldn't have anyone else to ask."

"Why me, though?"

"From what I know, you're the only one able to find Aikawa Jun on your own. You're the only one fit to be Aikawa Jun's rival. That's, as you said."

"....."

"Since this is a secret affair, I can't possibly ask for an organization's help — insurance also means a trump card, so it not being exposed is crucial. Taking that into account, there is no one else other than you I can ask this to."

"How splendid that you valued me so high, dear friend."

Kouta-san said, as if dealing with a child, but she didn't seem dissatisfied. Those were definitely my real thoughts, not just lip-service, but Kouta-san's a person with a lot of self-respect, so she may be surprisingly easy to handle.

"If I may add something, you're the only one with enough guts to get involved with the Zerozaki Clan. Though Kouta-san said so, it's not like I'm asking it carefreely. I knew that anyone else would be too scared of the Zerozaki Clan, so I asked you."

".....Insurance, that is what you called it. Then, obviously, you have another plan prepared?"

"Yes. Offense and defense, one for each."

".....Offense, and defense, huh." Kouta-san said meaningfully. "Since you lived for a few years in America, you have some experience with baseball, right?"

"At least. I know baseball's rules too."

"I am talking about a certain pitcher. That pitcher excelled over every other pitcher in all fields. One time, a journalist asked 'Why are you so outstanding?', that kind of off the mark question… What do you think he said?"

"Because of his effort……. or because of his talent, something like that?"

"No."

Kouta-san said.

"Because he thinks of throwing the ball against the batter as an attack — right. From the start, what this guy sees is completely

different from small fries who think that getting a strikeout is defense."

"....."

"Dear friend. If you have resolved yourself to fight, you should stop using soft and lukewarm words like attack or defense. It is unsightly."

Well, I don't intend to fight even one bit, so I can use them however much I want, said Kouta-san—

Taking the tab, she stood up.

Without saying goodbye, I looked at her back until she wasn't visible anymore.

Really…….

People working behind the scenes could say whatever they want. I was jealous.

Well, I originally was practically behind the scenes.

An observer, huh.

"I am counting on you, Kouta-san."

I said, after a pause,

I finished drinking my coffee,

And left the tea shop.

Towards the hotel's parking lot.

Now, I didn't have time — it wasn't like that, but no matter how much time I had on my hands, it wasn't enough, so after seeing Kouta-san not taking it lightly and leaving quickly, I searched for the Fiat standing out in the parking lot. When I approached it, intending to knock on the window.

In the driver's seat, Hikari-san was sleeping.

Drowsily.

Dozing off.

Closing her eyes.

Without even breathing, peacefully.

"....."

Softly,

so as to not make noise, I went away from the car.

And hid myself in the shadow of a nearby pillar.

"Yes……. Of course."

That's…… Of course.

It didn’t matter whether she was Hikari-san or Teruko-san — if she took care of me all day long, she wouldn't have time to rest…….

I felt sorry.

From the bottom of my heart, I felt sorry.

But…….

But.

Even then…… for just a little more.

I wanted to rely on her.

I wanted her to... support me.

After that, I left the hotel and went around Shinkyogoku to kill time, and, after spending about two hours at a game center, I came back to the parking lot once again.

"Sorry. The story went for a little too long."

"No, I do not mind. It went by in a blink of an eye."

"I guess."

"What?"

"Please get the car out."

"Ah, yes. Where should we go next?"

"Kunagisa's building, please."

I said.

"You remember the way, right?"

2

Ii-chan is like boku-sama-chan's wife who lives elsewhere, said Kunagisa, still showing her back.

"Sorry that I couldn't come to visit you again."

"It's fine. It wasn't that serious of an injury anyway."

On the floor, so covered with cords and cables that there was nowhere to put my feet, I was sitting cross-legged, looking at the back of the girl sitting on a chair and typing on a total of eight keyboards and seventeen computers.

"It kinda feels…… like you're more busy than ever."

"Yes."

"If you admit it, then you must be really busy."

"Yes."

".....No amiability, huh."

"Yes."

Uwaah.

It was hard to voice my request.

".....What are you playing around with this time? You seem awfully focused, or rather engrossed. I hope you're not thinking of doing any mischief like before, are you?"

"Mmm. Speaking of like before, it is like before, but more than simply like before, I guess it's even more like before."

"What? Now how many times did you say 'before'?"

"Four times."

"Yeah……"

"In other words, work for the Kunagisa Syndicate."

Kunagisa said.

Though she didn't turn back and wasn't being as friendly as usual,

it was still impressive that her work efficiency didn't drop at all while speaking.

"Has it been six years? Or maybe a bit more? Anyway, since boku-sama-chan is returning to the Kunagisa Syndicate, I need to lend a hand to help Nao-kun."

"Aah, it's about that. Then it's not just playing around, but proper work."

"Mmm. Not exactly. The official return is still some time away. There are some bothersome formalities to do, but Nao-kun is in charge of that. What boku-sama-chan is doing is preparation for that."

"Preparation?"

"Preparing work."

"Hmm. I see."

"Incompetent people, you see."

"What?"

"There were incompetent people."

"I see."

"And a lot of them. Only incompetent people."

".....It's really rare for you to directly call someone incompetent……. Choose a softer way to say it. If someone competent like you speaks so negatively, it sends a bad image."

"But, I mean. All the systems and programs I created more than six years ago, those incompetents just jumbled them all up. Two days ago, I thought of preparing a bit early, I made up my mind and even though it was lighthearted at that time, what a pain."

"Yeah……."

I see.

While Kunagisa was isolated from the Kunagisa Syndicate, the people from the Kunagisa Syndicate could not handle what she left behind — that 'lost technology', if you were to put it grandly — and after fiddling with it, they ended up powering it down. Since Kunagisa's engineering abilities were more artistic than just genius-like, I could understand her being upset if someone created a poor man's version of her work. Like the juvenile version of 'Anne of Green Gables'. But 'lost technology' was an exaggeration, and since it was

estimated as overtechnology, you couldn't really blame the guys from the Syndicate in this case. Since I'd thought that, though I had no obligation to, I said "Isn't it fine?" to defend whom Kunagisa called *incompetents*.

"That level of work, take it as rehab to prepare for your return. If you end up working inside an organization, you'll always get dragged down. From your perspective, it's not even hard work, is it?"

"It's a pain because I don't understand what those incompetents thought when they were doing it. The reasons and causes are important. That's why, even if the task itself is easy, researching the cause takes time. Aah, incompetents, incompetents, incompetents, incompetents! I hate incompetents! I'll tell Nao-kun to get them all fired."

"....."

Aah…….. How nostalgic.

I see, it wasn't rare, but nostalgic.

That reminded me, that was the kind of person she was.

Long ago.

While she was still in the Kunagisa Syndicate.

Before — getting expelled.

I'd completely forgotten.

Professor Kyouichirou must have had a hard time.

But well, seeing her getting in high spirits working on something, it was much better and healthier compared to the time she had zero life energy and was just lying in bed all day.

She'd really become healthier, I thought.

Now it should be fine, I thought.

It was good, I thought.

It was good — I thought that from the bottom of my heart.

"Just watch! I'll construct a system so perfect that no one other than boku-sama-chan can handle it."

"Then your objective would be unclear."

Putting the cart before the horse.

Zero life energy was still zero life energy, huh.

"Organizations kill individuality, after all. It's not the kind of place

creators should be in. You can't just stay stoic inside an organization. So if that's the case, you should be the one to adjust."

"Humph! But that wasn't the case at all in *Team*."

"But you couldn't really call that an organization, could you?"

"Uni."

I thought I was right, but Kunagisa went silent.

Saying that she'd never felt any distress in her life save for the few years when she was putting together *Team*, she talked about her hardships…….. Utsurigi, for example, was the number one you shouldn't make your subordinate.

Umm.

Then, it must've been hard for the fox-masked man too.

But in that man's case, it was like he neglected or set the *Thirteen Stairs* totally free.

"....."

By the way, Hikari-san was once again waiting in the parking lot.

Since, if she'd met Kunagisa, it would've become clear whether she was Hikari-san or Teruko-san, before she had the chance to say anything, I told her "I need to talk about something secret, so I'm sorry, but could you wait here again?".

What I needed to talk about wasn't much of a secret though — even then, well.

Me having something secret to talk about wasn't a total lie.

".....How long do you think your work will take?"

"Today's already done for. I can't believe it. Those frightening incompetents! Huh, that reminds me, Ii-chan, why'd you come here? Wasn't your private life a complete mess?"

"Yes."

I said.

"I have a request."

"Accepted."

Kunagisa stopped her hands and faced me.

"What should I do?"

"Mainly, defense."

"Defense?"

"Guarding."

"Hmm."

"Using the Kunagisa Syndicate's power to its maximum — I want you to protect anyone that had any connection to me in the countries I've been to."

"……..Protect, huh."

Kunagisa —

repeated my words meaningfully.

As if she'd noticed it all.

"Yeah."

I clearly nodded.

"Before, it was just you. But before I knew it, I made quite a few people I want to protect."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"I wonder. I feel like I've become weaker."

"That's not a bad thing."

Kunagisa chuckled.

"Ii-chan never changes."

"……Is that so?"

"Yes."

Kunagisa said.

"Ii-chan just said 'before I knew it', but in reality, it's probably been that way since way back. Ii-chan was always trying to protect everyone — trying to protect everyone around you — and boku-sama-chan was simply one amongst them. That's what I've always thought."

"Really……. I mean, you've always had such a stupid idea? How ridiculous — ridiculous." I was perplexed by Kunagisa's words. "It's not like that. Before, I was — surely, trying to break everyone. I wanted everyone to disappear."

Six years ago.

Kunagisa Syndicate.

Kunagisa Tomo.

Little sister...

"It's not like that. It's not like that at all."

"....."

"Because you were everyone's Ii-chan, Boku-sama-chan wanted to make you solely my Ii-chan. To be honest."

".....At the very least, even since way before, I've always been yours. That still hasn't changed at all. Certainly, it may never change."

"Fishy line."

"I'm being serious."

To the joking Kunagisa, I said.

"If you manage to return to the Kunagisa Syndicate, and if I manage to return alive from the worthless trouble I'm currently facing."

"What?"

"Let's get married."

"Buhoh!"

Kunagisa spat out.

Cough cough, she coughed with all her strength.

……..An unexpected reaction.

Rather, she broke into a laugh.

Shivering and looking down, covering her abdomen.

Umm……

Death by laughter must be painful.

Rather, why was she laughing…….

"Wh…… what's that?"

"It's the first time I've seen you acting like this….."

"I'm just taken aback."

"No…… Since you and I are no longer frozen in the same spot, like, wouldn't it be better to have something concrete like that? Something concrete and unchanging, in that sense, might be necessary."

"……..Seriously?"

"Yes. A proposal."

"It's sudden."

"Because I just thought of it."

"Nonsense?"

"Not….. nonsense."

"Marrying between friends?"

"Isn't it fine? I like you."

"If you were to marry boku-sama-chan, Ii-chan…… this time you really would be taken in by the Kunagisa Syndicate."

"……..I don't mind."

I nodded.

"In itself, it might be good."

"……You really don't change."

It seems Kunagisa finally calmed down.

She corrected her posture.

"It was the case six years ago too."

"Maybe. Though I don't remember that time now."

"When Ii-chan says something, he sure is stubborn."

"Maybe. Though I don't remember that time now."

Nor did I want to remember though.

"Yes. Got it."

Kunagisa turned back towards her computers.

To her back, I said.

"When everything's over, let's get married."

"Yes."

Very naturally,

A normal conversation.

"Wait until my birthday. Let's do it after we both turn twenty. What will you do about university?"

"I don't mind continuing, but if I were to be affiliated with the Syndicate, I'd have to give up. A university diploma doesn't mean anything to that organization."

"I think it'll be fine. If we're talking about that, isn't there something more troublesome to take care of?"

"What is it?"

"It'll be Ii-chan's job to persuade Nao-kun."

"……..No way. Absolutely not. You do it."

"Even boku-sama-chan doesn't want to. I definitely won't. That should be your nonsense's turn."

"Umm……."

Well, that may be the case.

But Nao-san…….

That guy is quite a siscon.

"Well….. That's for if everything goes right. It's already so much of a pain, so if I don't prepare a reward at the end, I wouldn't be able to do it."

"A reward for you. Being boku-sama-chan?"

"For me, there isn't a better reward than that. You're always my number one."

"You talk big. Even though you ran away once."

"....."

Kunagisa giggled.

"I absolutely don't hate you for what happened six years ago, and I don't think it was your fault, but about you running away after that, boku-sama-chan may be a bit angry."

".....It's better than being forgiven easily."

Being forgiven — hurt more than anything.

It's been the case since way back.

Not changing went for you too.

"So, at the very least, be angry about that."

".....I've wanted to ask for a while. Why did Ii-chan come back from the ER3 System?"

"....."

"Without even graduating. Dropping out."

"I wanted to see you — was one of the reasons."

"Which means there was something else, right?"

".....A friend, you see."

I answered, making myself seem as composed as possible.

"Because a friend died."

"....."

"Because of me — they died."

The Orange Seed.

Omokage Magokoro.

MS-2.

"'No matter where I am, no matter what I do, it's the same.' That's

what I thought at the time."

"That's why you came back?"

"Wanting to settle the past."

"It's hard to understand. For boku-sama-chan."

"Yeah. I guess." I nodded and continued talking to Kunagisa's back. "Therefore, in the end, I came back to Japan to see you. Among the friends that died because of me, you were the only one to still be alive."

Kunagisa too — like Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun.

Even though they should've been dead, even though they were killed,

even though I'd broken her,

and killed her,

she lived.

She'd managed to stay alive.

"....."

Saitou Takashi said that Kajou Akira lived on in his heart.

As was my little sister, deeply rooted inside me.

But, however.

Then, for me, Omokage Magokoro...

"With you…… you and I…… no, what I did to you — the sins I committed to you, to repent……."

"Those sins no longer exist, and didn't I say they never existed from the start?" Kunagisa said. "If you say you proposed for that reason, it's irritating, so take it back."

"……Aah, no. In reality, it's not something that complicated. In the end, I just like being beside you the most. It's just that."

"Beside boku-sama-chan, huh." Kunagisa said, weirdly. "Then beside boku-sama-chan is Ii-chan's reserved seat. I will leave it permanently open for Ii-chan."

"I'm thankful."

"Ii-chan's side too, leave it open. Uni, it's become pretty noisy around Ii-chan compared to before."

"……..True. Why it became like this, I have no idea."

"Uni. Well, I get it. Leave the defense to me. Protecting them

means that it's better if the people in question don't notice, right?"

"Yeah. I don't want them to know too much. And I don't want them to worry needlessly. It would be a pain if they tried to meddle in response. I'm not saying it's crucial, but please try as much as possible not to be noticed."

"Ii-chan doesn't need bodyguards?"

"Yes. I'll be fine. Rather, that would make it harder to move." I said. "Also, I don't think I need to tell you, but don't forget your own protection. Though I don't think anything could happen in this building—"

Even then,

this place is known by the fox-masked man.

There is no such thing as too much caution.

"—You are my Achilles heel…… or rather, my lifeline. The other side — the ones currently considering me an enemy know that."

Whether they would actually do anything was pretty iffy.

Unclear.

"Not only the protection of the Kunagisa Syndicate, if possible — let me see. Right, you should call your allies from your *Team* days. If it's for your sake, those guys would rush in without needing to hear it twice."

"Hmm. Right. That may be good too…… I think getting everyone will be impossible, but I guess I'll try to call them. Is there anything else boku-sama-chan can do?"

"No. Also, I think the information war phase is already over. So, for now, what you should prioritize the most is your own safety. Aah…… right. If it comes to it, I may have to use this place to hide. At that time, I'll rely on you to cover me."

"Cover Ii-chan?"

"Perhaps, though it could be someone else. Currently, there's no place safer than here for me. So you too, stay here as much as possible. As usual, be a hikikomori."

"Understood."

"....."

"Uni? What? You look puzzled."

"No……. it's like, how should I say it."

It seemed... I was in an indescribable mood, untying my legs and, for some reason, trying to sit on my knees.

I scratched my head.

"Kind of anticlimactic…… Rather, I was surprised that you accepted it so easily. I thought that you'd have a lot of things to say, so……. Err, how should I say it……"

"It makes it difficult?"

"Well……."

"Spare me, Ii-chan. I've never even once refused one of Ii-chan's requests, have I? I'm really happy that Ii-chan decided to rely on me. I said it clearly, didn't I, **that Ii-chan directly involving me** — it makes me honestly happy."

"That may be true……. But, if you talked about destroying the Earth again, I don't know what I would've done….."

"Ahaha, Ii-chan remembers that even with your memory. That was obviously a joke."

"A joke……"

"You shouldn't take every little thing boku-sama-chan says seriously. I wanted to liven things up, so I just said it on the spot. But, well, this boku-sama-chan should grow up too. Soon — soon, I will return to the organization, properly help Nao-kun and try to make him accept it."

Kunagisa turned her head towards me.

"So, for better or for worse, I can't continue like this. I'll stop only saying selfish things."

"……..Hmm."

If she said that,

I could only nod.

"Though I also feel that it's not like you. Well, it's probably the right thing to do, though….."

"It would have been fine when I was in a *stoppage*, but if I am to *grow*, it's different. It's not the time to get desperate."

"Desperate."

It was probably… about her *Team* days.

A time I didn't know about,

about Kunagisa Tomo.

"......Then, for now, you should stop trying to get those incompetents fired. I said so earlier, but that's what being part of an organization, being an adult, means."

"Right. That may be true. That's surely the case. Then I will forgive that, too. If Ii-chan says so. Yes, it might not be bad work for my instincts, which have grown dull while I was unemployed. But, well, but—" With a somewhat heavy tone, melancholically, Kunagisa continued. "Boku-sama-chan should try to do other things properly too, from now on."

"Other things? What kind of things?"

"Other things. Other things are other things. Other things are, for now, trying to understand the pain of Ii-chan's wounds—"

Saying that,

Kunagisa frivolously let out a loose smile.

"I'm beaten."

"Yes."

"I guess Jun-chan was the trigger."

"Yeah?"

"Mmm. Ii-chan…." Kunagisa said. "Since Ii-chan doesn't change — he changes."

"....."

"I'm beaten."

Kunagisa frivolously,

let out a loose smile.

3

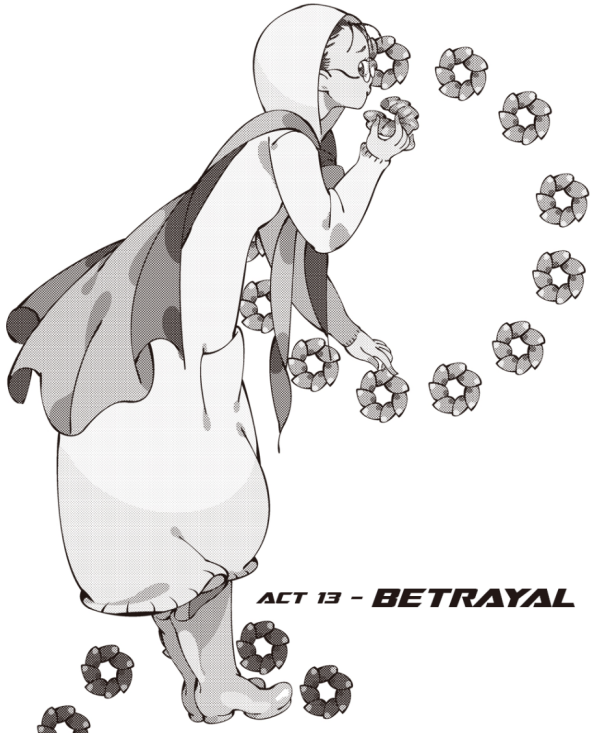
I returned to the apartment.

Since Moeta-kun died and Houko-chan and Miiko-san were at the hospital, only Nanananami and Koutoumaru-san were currently living here. On a Monday, at this hour, those two should be away. Alongside Hikari-san, I climbed the stairs, passed by the door of Miiko-san's room, unlocked the door of my room, and entered.

"……Eh?"

Orange hair.

Omokage Magokoro was there.



ACT 13 - BETRAYAL OF DENIAL

EMOTO SONOKI
DOCTOR

0

Something you can't see isn't there.

1

She liked places with few people.

Judging from her personality, she probably wouldn't come out somewhere with a lot of people. Also, even if that were not the case, she stood out too much. Setting her personality aside, her appearance was too graceful.

That being said, it wouldn't be right for her to be left unattended either.

It would have been too dangerous when the time came.

She wanted to avoid danger.

Somewhere with a reasonable amount of people, and furthermore, somewhere well ventilated, where she could look around — therefore, in this case, not a hotel or a tea shop, where we could talk privately. Thinking of the risk, somewhere outside would be best.

At the end of my thinking.

I chose the Kyoto Imperial Garden as the meeting spot.

A national garden with the Kyoto Imperial Garden as its center.

It would soon be mid October, so even though we were in the season of beautiful maple trees, the tourists were sparse. On top of that, it was excessively spacious, so I did not know any place more

fitting than that in Kyoto. Since Roushisha University, which Nanananami attends, was just next door, I had a few chances to visit when I took a walk with her or sat on a bench and read. I won't say I owned the place, but I was somewhat used to this park.

Well, the Imperial Garden was a wide place, so, more specifically, I chose the area in front of the Keirenmon. There were benches everywhere here, so we wouldn't have any trouble finding a place to talk. I transmitted that we should use the enormous aphananthe tree as a marker.

It wouldn't be respectful to go empty handed, so instead of coming straight from the apartment, I deviated a bit from my route and bought ten donuts from a nearby Mister Donuts (since it was on sale, it ended up costing only 525 yen without tax), then reached the Kyoto Imperial Garden.

Meeting time, ten minutes before three in the afternoon.

It was a pleasant day.

By the way, I hadn't used the Fiat today, but my own two feet.

Humans need to walk every once in a while.

Hikari-san — hadn't come with me today.

She was taking care of *her* at the apartment.

…….

A bit unpleasant.

Even though she was my maid.

No, well, when considering the person I was about to meet, bringing Hikari-san would just make things more difficult. And, above all else, I would've been too worried leaving *her* somewhere we couldn't see.

Now.

Straight from Nakadachiuri to the Imperial Garden.

Upon reaching the palace and turning to the right,

I came to see the aphananthe tree,

and passed it,

going left at the next branch road, Keirenmon—

"....."

Raincoat.

Wearing a white raincoat with thick fabric and long hems, the front zip and buttons closed firmly as if rejecting something and, to top it all off, as if saying 'how about that', wearing the hood tightly over her head, standing upright and looking down, there was a female figure.

I'll say it just in case, but it wasn't raining.

Clear weather.

……..

However, she had rubber boots on…….

Yellow rubber boots.

Actually, I didn't understand at all.

Around the Kenreimon, there wasn't anyone but her.

It was way less populated than usual.

…….....As I said, being left unattended was a problem.

I thought about going home after that, but I couldn't really do that. So, resolving myself, as amiably as possible, in an unconcerned manner,

"Ah, Emoto-san. You're early."

While trotting over to her, I called out in a bright voice.

Her face, which had previously been looking down,

Emoto Sonoki-san slowly raised it.

"Ugh……. Uh, uugh, uuuuuughh."

"....."

She'd immediately started crying.

Suddenly, her knees collapsed and she crouched.

"I, I thought you, wouldn't c-come……. I was so, so worried…….. b-but, thinking that you may come soon, I couldn't go home, i-it was lonely, and desolate, I thought I might die li-like that, alone, I-I asked myself why you wouldn't come, c-c…….. cruel, so cruel, making me wait this much……."

"Eh……. Ah, err, but it's still ten minutes bef—"

"I came at two…….. t-to not be late, thinking it would be bad to make you wait, ev-even then, even though I did all that, y-you made me wait one hour, without even a word of apology…….. c-cruel, s-so you think making someone like me wait is normal, n-no matter what I

feel, you don't care. W-what feelings did you t-think I've been waiting with, how do you think I've spent this hour, without considering that one bit, ugh, uuuugh, ugh, uuugh."

"....."

Her personality was more troublesome than I'd thought.

I had the faint hope that perhaps Emoto-san's character only seemed strange to us because we were in the special environment that was Sumiyuri Academy, but she destroyed that optimism.

"T-to come here, s-so that I could come here, how much courage do you think I mustered?"

"Aah……. Well, that may be true."

".....Ah. T-that, is that Mister Donuts?" Emoto-san, who had been rubbing her head while crying, suddenly raised her head. "What you are holding, that bag."

"Eh? Aah, yes."

".....Do you have French cruller?"

"They are all French crullers."

"How many?"

"Ten."

"....."

Emoto-san stood up and extended a hand towards me. Judging that she probably wasn't asking for a handshake, I gave her the bag of Mister Donuts.

Emoto-san confirmed the insides.

Then, gyaah, she hugged it.

"Ehe, happiness."

"....."

It was bad….

It was really bad……

I may have really liked her a lot…..

She hit all the right points.

"The only things that God blessed this world with are integers and French crullers."

"Yeah……."

I didn't hate them, but I'd never thought that much of them……

Ummm.

"Ehehe…… mmh. There's nothing to drink."

"Ah……. Sorry. I was careless. Should I go buy something nearby?"

"No need. It's fine. I would rather eat faster."

"Is that so. Then, let's go to a bench."

"Yes."

By the immense power of French crullers, the conversation with Emoto-san progressed miraculously. Well, it's not really related, but French crullers are definitely the way to go for donuts.

We sat on the bench nearest to the Kenreimon.

"Munch munch."

Emoto-san took a French cruller in each hand and filled her cheeks like a squirrel. It seemed she already had one in her mouth.

Uwaah…… She seemed really happy.

It was the first time I'd seen her that happy.

"I see. What, so you called me out to this place to feed me Mister Donuts."

"Of course not."

"Ah…… Sorry. I, immediately got cocky, I'm no good…….. Really no good, there's probably nobody worse than me……."

Emoto-san was dejected again.

Umm…….

I should have bought more donuts.

"....."

October — the eleventh.

Tuesday.

The day after Monday.

I called out the *Doctor*, Emoto Sonoki.

Since both the insurance and the defense had been completed, next came the attack.

I called her out by phone yesterday, on the tenth of October after being discharged, talking to Kouta-san and to Kunagisa. Well, there had been **some unforeseen events** — but since they weren't anything inconvenient to me, there was no need for a change in plan.

Rather, they accelerated it.

I could not hesitate.

I couldn't afford to be lost.

"But you know…… *Ii-chan*."

"What is it?"

"How did you know my phone number?"

"....."

Don't ask so plainly.

It was a pain to make jokes.

"Ah, no…… Didn't you notice?"

It seemed that Emoto-san had a tendency to get uncomfortable when the other person wasn't speaking, so I rearranged her words carefully. It would've been a pain otherwise, so I decided to briefly explain the situation.

"That day……. you see."

"That day?"

"At Sumiyuri Academy, the day when you, the *Thirteen Stairs*, mister fox and I fought — in that second gymnasium, mister fox called you with his cellphone, didn't he?"

"Errr. Aah, yes. That reminds me, that may have happened."

"Well, I couldn't get mister fox's number since he was the one calling, but, from the movement of his fingers, I could get the number he was typing."

".....And you remembered that?"

"Yeah, basically."

"What an amazing memory……"

"Not really. This much is normal for me. In the end, it's just a problem of concentration and perception. From my perspective, it's natural. It's not like pi; it's just an eleven digit number. Wouldn't people who can't remember it be rarer?"

In reality, I only remembered it faintly, so I'd tried the combination of eleven digits over and over and over, changing one or two digits every time, and after rearranging for dozens, hundreds of times, I connected to Emoto-san's number. However, since, even if I told her about all that work, Emoto-san would still praise me, I kept it

a secret.

"So…… then, *Ii-chan*. The important part is from here, but…….. Err, why did you call me here?"

"Well, from my perspective, it was slightly unexpected that you'd agree that easily. I'll confirm just in case, but — did you keep it a secret from mister fox?"

"Y-yes." Emoto-san nodded. "Rather, mister fox can't be bothered to be concerned about someone like me—"

"……. I guess so."

"?"

"No, just talking to myself."

I lightly swayed my head.

Then I indirectly surveyed my surroundings.

There was no surveillance that I could see.

Emoto-san really had come alone.

Also, I couldn't believe she was someone capable of lying about this. I'd trust her here.

"Then I'll cut to the chase, to my request."

"Y-yes……. I'm scared, but I will listen."

".....Emoto Sonoki-san."

I said.

Without hesitation.

"Please betray mister fox and work with me."

"....."

Emoto-san inadvertently dropped the French crullers she was holding. Since I'd expected that reaction, I managed to catch them before they reached the ground,

and stuffed them in her vacantly open mouth.

"I need your power."

".....Wha-what are you saying……. Do you understand? Ar-are you an idiot? I-I am — in the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"Naturally, I'm aware of that. And that you're one of the initial members too, of course. Not one of the new ones gathered in the last few months, I'm well aware that you've had a long relationship with

mister fox, like Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan — painfully so. Therefore."

I held her right hand with both of mine hands.

"Therefore, I need your power."

"……..U-uuuh."

Emoto-san swayed her hands and tried to run away from me. She seemed somewhat foolish because of the French crullers in her mouth, but her expression was desperate.

And quickly — the tears came.

"Wh-why, m-me, are you d-demanding this, of me? Wh-why, why, only me, this weird position……"

"Weird position……."

"O-only me, only me, why, this kind of thing……. Wh-why, why me…… more than me, aren't there others? T-there are a lot, of other *Steps*, other than me—"

"Because, that day — you grieved Izumu-kun's death too."

"……."

She seemed... very sad.

Emoto-san seemed very sad.

without any tears,

without any words,

she grieved Izumu-kun's death.

"—Then you are the same as me."

"…….The same."

Right,

The same.

"Emoto-san. You see, I — to fight mister fox, I plan on breaking the *Thirteen Stairs* apart."

I continued, while watching Emoto-san's expression.

Though it was extremely hard to do so, because of the hood and her hair.

Anyway, I continued.

The Nonsense User, continued.

"Mister fox once called the *Thirteen Stairs* his *limbs* — that, since he had already been expelled from causality, he needed arms and legs

that would affect the world and the Story, that it was necessary—"

"....."

"Then I'll *pluck* out those limbs first."

"Those... limbs."

"In that sense, it's not **just you — I want all *Thirteen Stairs* to betray him;** I plan on making them all betray him."

I said.

"Of course, that's just the ideal scenario. I can't deny that it's clumsy compared to the old Chinese strategies, but I can't think of a better plan. I sadly just don't have enough power to crush mister fox yet. I am really, really scared of him. But, last time — at Sumiyuri Academy — when I came in contact with the *Thirteen Stairs*, including you, and fought them, I realized. Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan, the Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic, those two — no, considering their personalities as exceptions, for each individual step of the *Thirteen Stairs*, **it's not like we can't do anything**."

"....."

"Individual attacks. For Kino-san's *poison*, as long as we know about it, there are countless ways to deal with it. In terms of pure violence, the Miotsukushi Sisters are certainly to be feared, but not as much as Izumu-kun. In the end, they are just a mishmash of riff-raffs. I think he had no intention of commanding them from the beginning. In the end, the ones we should watch out for in the *Thirteen Stairs*, excluding *her* who killed Izumu-kun, The Orange Seed, are the veteran members, the six who were present in October."

The first *six steps*.

Kajou Akira.

Ichirizuka Konomi.

Niounomiya Izumu.

Niounomiya Rizumu.

And — Emoto Sonoki and Utage Kudan.

It wasn't like I was obeying Nureginu-san's words, however, *not choosing your means to attain your goal*, what Nureginu-san of the *Yamiguchi* said certainly hit the mark.

To collapse the Thirteen Stairs, first, Utage Kudan, or —

Emoto Sonoki.

Aerial Weapon and Doctor.

These two were the key figures.

"Please, Emoto-san. Please — help me."

"Do…… do you think, I would, b-betray mister fox? Th-that, I could do, something t-this cowardly?"

"That's what I wish, but……. Honestly, I don't know. It may be an absurd request. But — no matter what……. I don't want to make someone who grieved Izumu-kun's death my enemy."

".....It's not really because it was Izumu-kun." Emoto-san said. "I-if someone dies, I would grief, no matter who they are."

"....."

That's—

'Everyone should just die, the world should just end' — those weren't the words of someone who would say that.

But.

I knew it.

It was something I knew.

That Emoto-san was this kind of person.

Otherwise,

she couldn't be a doctor with this kind of personality.

This person — Emoto Sonoki, simply.

Didn't want anyone to get hurt.

There were times when she went overboard,

but she never gave up.

That, just that — wasn't wrong.

Just that was not wrong.

"Frankly, from my perspective, you, the *Step* known as Emoto Sonoki, collapsing the *Thirteen Stair* that is Emoto Sonoki…….. wouldn't be that hard. Since you're so troubled over this stupid request, since you answered to that stupid invitation, **collapsing you**…… shouldn't be that hard for me."

".....I-is that…… a th-threat? Th-threats, do not wo—"

"Don't misunderstand— though I said it wouldn't be hard, I'm sure I wouldn't be able to do it. I can't hate you, and I can't think of you as

an enemy. Emoto-san, you are — I'm sure, not someone with a very kind personality. I think your personality is too weak to be kind. But, at the very least, you're exceptional."

"....."

Though not kind — exceptional[1].

"You're someone that gets hurt pretty easily — but therefore, you've probably never hurt anyone."

"Th-that's, I am, simply a doctor."

"**Therefore**."

"I-I am, I am, even if I cure the wounds of the body, even if I can cure the wounds of the mind — I can't cure true wounds, I am, not useful, to anyone—"

"I'm asking you to be useful to me."

I looked into her eyes.

Looking into people's eyes — to be honest, I didn't like it.

Because it felt like I was being seen through.

It was probably the same for Emoto-san.

Earlier, she'd averted her eyes.

But,

I looked into them.

"If your reason for being next to mister fox is that there are a lot of injured people, **it's the same if you're next to me.** The people hurt by my side — I want you to heal them. I want to transfer to you the rights to cure my wounds."

".....B-but."

"Please become my ally, Emoto-san."

"But — I'm..." While swaying her head, tears were slowly spilling from her eyes. "Even you if say that, I don't know, what to do—"

"....."

"D-don't say it like that……. don't, ask me questions. D-don't ask for my opinion. F-force—"

Emoto-san looked at me, as if clinging to me.

Her pupils, covered with tears, were looking at me.

Looking at me.

"Force... me. Please force me. If you force me — I will obey. Y-you

just need to threaten me. Frankly, you just need to threaten me. Threaten me properly, don't stop halfway through. Forcefully make me become your ally. Strongly, force me so that I can't go against you. **Like mister fox**. Like mister fox, that me obeying you is natural — say it like that. If you do that, I—"

".....I don't know whether mister fox forced you or not, but your current position is something that the old you chose. I have no intention of snatching away that from you."

Neither do I intend—

To imitate mister fox.

I didn't have an absolute feeling like Saitou Takashi or Aikawa Jun.

I didn't have anything like that.

All I could do was just bow my head.

If you asked me what I was doing — I would answer like this.

This is my Original.

"You should choose. **I can't bear your responsibility**. I'm already full of my own. Just like I did, you should give me your conditions. I don't need limbs like mister fox — I'm fine with the ones on my body, thin as they are. What I earnestly want right now is friends to fight alongside me."

"Friends……."

"Emoto-san. Would you — become my friend?"

"....."

Emoto-san went silent.

I too, stayed silent.

I didn't have anything more to say.

Any more and it would be coercion.

That would just be menacing for her.

Despite myself, as usual, I didn't think it was a smart solution.

Nor did I know if this was correct.

Clumsy and awkward.

I thought I was requesting something absurd of Emoto-san.

But.

Even then, I—

For me, who couldn't become the Strongest,
more than the Worst, I wanted to become the Weakest.
".....French crullers."
"Eh…….?"
"French crullers, one hundred."
"....."
"Then — I will help you."
Emoto-san said.
She held my hand back.
And properly looked at my eyes.
"I will betray mister fox — and become your friend."
".....Is that fine?"
"Yes. I mean, I, to be honest—"
Emoto-san.
Probably for the first time in her life, said what she really thought.

"—I don't really want the world to end."

2

First, I told Emoto-san all the information that I had. Having Emoto-san accurately understand the situation was the first objective, and showing my trust towards Emoto-san the second.

Also, there was one more, a third objective — I wanted to confirm how much of our information had been leaked to mister fox. Of course, it wasn't clear how much of mister fox's information was passed on to Emoto-san, but to know whether everything was leaked, or whether it was a blind spot for him — that was necessary. I'd explained it all in detail, so, by the end of my summary, it was already over five in the afternoon.

I'd also talked about the phone call from Nureginu-san, and at the end,

I talked about Magokoro.

Omokage Magokoro, The Orange Seed, now

was at my apartment.

Without a doubt.

"Hmm……."

Emoto-san, despite her personality, seemed like she was quick on the uptake, so she understood everything on her first listen. She nodded quietly.

"I see…… right, of course it is — thinking about it, it is obvious, yes, I see…. That's why she fled…… that girl."

"I still haven't heard the details from her — she seemed tired."

"Tired, no wonder. That's, yeah..." Emoto-san said meaningfully. "..... You know, *Ii-chan*."

"Ah…… if possible, could you stop that? That way of calling me... to be honest, I don't really like it."

"But—"

"Originally, my little sister called me that, and Kunagisa imitated it — Magokoro just imitated it too. Well…….. it would be more correct to say I let them imitate it, though."

"Hmm. Then, what should I call you?"

"However you like — errr, then….."

Ikkun.

Inoji.

Ii-nii.

Ii-no.

Inosuke.

I~i~.

Ikki.

……Somehow, I didn't like any of them.

Thinking about it, they were all horrible nicknames……..

"…….Ikkun, please."

"Mm. Understood. Then…… Ikkun."

"Yeah."

"Ikkun."

"……..Yeah."

"Ikkun."

"……..Yeah?"

"E-ehehe. A nickname, it's my first time using one."

"....."

Friends and acquaintances……. It seemed like she didn't have any.

Though she was called by one, she 'd never used one.

It unconsciously made my heart hurt.

"You know, Mister fox is in big trouble. I said it earlier, but……. Umm, Magokoro-chan ran away."

"....."

"So she was at your place……."

"Well, though it only happened yesterday, I guess mister fox already suspects it……. But, for that Omokage Magokoro — even if it's mister fox, there's probably nothing he can do."

Speaking of unexpected things,

for me, it wasn't inconvenient.

Rather, very convenient.

Just because of that, I'd accept it.

"Mister fox is……." Emoto-san said. "His hands are full with just repairing the damages caused by Magokoro-chan. I don't really want to say it, but — mister fox was a bit too off in his estimation. From my viewpoint as a doctor."

"About Magokoro?"

"Yes."

Emoto-san said.

"That girl — she is absurd, after all."

"Yes…… even Aikawa Jun was beaten in one blow. But, in his own way, didn't mister fox prepare a counterplan?"

He said that.

That he wouldn't make the same mistake as ten years ago.

For that, there was the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Migishita Rurero.

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Kino Raichi.

Those three.

Their roles were restraining Omokage Magokoro.

".....I, knew it. I properly, warned, mister fox. **That, for that girl, just that — it's really not enough**."

".....What did mister fox say?"

"Nothing, really. Just, **I see**."

"Then…… more than him being off, it might be the situation he expected. Making the best counterplan possible, doing his best — the rest goes as it will."

Even then.

In that case, it wasn't the same.

Even if it was inevitable that it happened like that, in that case, no matter what, no matter how it went, it was not the same.

For mister fox — this was a bet.

A gamble.

Right, said Emoto-san.

"Th-that's why…… Err, um…… I think that, mister fox — he lost his gamble. If we see it like that, right now, he is fully making up for it. Yes, this is not the time to lay a hand on you. In reality, err, he wanted to begin meddling around the halfpoint of October, but it doesn't seem like that will be the case, anymore."

"……."

"The plans, he must — change them all."

"Magokoro is, for mister fox, for his *plans*…. for the confrontation with me, or rather, for *the end of the world* — an essential existence, an essential component."

My connection.

And she probably had more meaning than that.

"……..Although we're not in a situation where we can say a lot about that. No matter what mister fox says, our own essential existence, Aikawa-san, is in his hands right now."

"Yes……. Right."

"So the trump cards got mixed up….. it's like playing Old Maid. I can't do it. There are too many jokers."

"……."

"By the way — what about Aikawa-san?"

"I healed her." Emoto-san said. "It was hard, or rather…… the wounds themselves weren't that big of a deal…… it was a wound on her head, but yeah, she really has a tough head, that person."

"Mister fox talked about one of her eyes being crushed or something like that."

"No, that wasn't the case."

"……."

That bluffing bastard.

"Then — is she fine?"

"Yes. But, I don't know where she is. Because, after that, mister fox took her somewhere else. I guess only Konomi-chan knows the place."

"I see……."

Really…… What was it for?

I didn't get it.

What was he trying to do to Aikawa-san.

"Well…… Even just knowing that she's fine is good. As long as she's alive, we'll meet again sometime."

"How optimistic."

"I'm forcing myself. With these words." I shrugged. "Returning to the main point — about Magokoro escaping your surveillance, your management; exactly how much damage was done?"

Enough damage for the fox-masked man to have his hands full.

I wondered exactly how much that was.

Emoto-san said.

"Kino-kun died."

"....."

"Magokoro-chan's handling was, errr, as you already know, Kino-kun, Rurero-san, and Tokinomiya-san's job. But Kino-kun was killed and Rurero-san was severely injured. The only one unscathed is Tokinomiya-san, who was absent by chance."

Kino Raichi...

Did he die?

It was strangely... disappointing.

Not really sad.

It wasn't like it was sad.

Kino-san was just an enemy.

He got Miiko-san involved.

Just an enemy.

No fondness.

No hatred.

But — somehow it was still painful.

There was just an emptiness in my chest.

Like mud, it piled up in my chest.

"From that story…… It seems that **Magokoro aimed to move when Tokinomiya Jikoku was absent**."

"Yes…… the one who had the most dominating power over Magokoro-chan was Tokinomiya-san, after all. …….But, even then, until now…….. There should have been plenty of times without him around."

".....Probably, but… it's most likely because, that day, at the

academy, in that gymnasium, Magokoro saw me."

She certainly… saw me.

She recognized me.

She said *Ii-chan*.

"That's probably why — why she ran away from you."

Right. Oddly enough, it was as mister fox had said.

Rurero-san — was a bit late.

I had no way of knowing what kind of orders he gave to Rurero-san, but if she had reached that gymnasium even one second earlier, if she had sealed Magokoro's actions...

Magokoro wouldn't have been able to witness me.

It would have ended at me seeing Magokoro.

That was probably...

What the fox-masked man's plan had been.

That person, despite what he'd said, had no intention of really letting me meet Magokoro — I was sure, none at all.

That was just an introduction.

"Rurero-san……. It seems she was already injured, but — is she fine?"

"Ummm……."

Emoto-san looked down with her arms crossed.

It didn't seem she was fine.

"But, that person gets injured all the time, so that much should be fine. She probably won't go completely back to normal, but Rurero-san wouldn't mind that much."

"Someone who gets injured all the time, is it…….. I feel some affinity."

"That person, I like her."

"Is that so……."

Was it because she got injured a lot?

Not a reason for being liked that I could welcome.

"How much did you hear from Magokoro-chan?"

"Not much….. As I said earlier, she was so tired that we've barely even greeted each other."

"Ah…….. You know, Ikkun."

Emoto-san said.

"Kino-kun, Rurero-san, and Tokinomiya-san — each of them, with their powers, have been tampering with Magokoro-chan. Though I think you've guess as much—"

"Yeah. I got the gist."

"Yes. First, Kino-kun sealed Magokoro-chan's stamina, Rurero-san sealed her body, and Tokinomiya-san, her consciousness — each one of them was controlling her."

"....."

Stamina.

Body.

Consciousness.

"Magokoro-chan was in a situation where she couldn't exert even half of her original power. Even then, Tokinomiya-san distancing himself — was enough."

"..... At least…… I think there are other causes. That Nureginu-san left the *Thirteen Stairs*. That the Miotsukushi Sisters started acting on their own, so even if they haven't left *Thirteen Stairs*, they're no longer acting under mister fox's orders. Those are pretty important."

".....What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you understand? That means that, in the *Thirteen Stairs*, there are no longer any combatants. Magokoro's rampage — it could no longer be stopped by anyone."

"Ah……. right."

Emoto-san nodded as she understood.

"Exactly. Nureginu-san, Misora-chan or Takami-chan, as long as one of them was there, even if they couldn't subdue her, escaping would have probably been impossible."

"For mister fox, this is probably the worst case scenario. Bad luck on the level as sewing the eye of a needle a hundred times in a row. I have pretty bad luck myself, but — mister fox's everyday doings must be pretty bad."

I hate October — he said.

I see, I understand.

October was surely, for mister fox,

the demon's gate.

Though that would be a manner of speaking touching on fate.

"Err……. Even if she was treated as a cadet, she was still one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, so now that Kino-san and Rurero-san have retired……"

"Ah, no. Rurero-san will probably come back quickly. It's not to the point of retiring or being beyond recovery. It is a terrible injury……. but she is very strong willed."

"Is that so. Then, that means Magokoro and Kino-san left the *Thirteen Stairs*—"

I counted on my fingers.

Of course, subtracting Emoto Sonoki as well,

among the *Thirteen Stairs*, seven or so left.

…….Half — huh.

Even then,

seven was definitely not a small number.

"Those remaining are — Ichirizuka Konomi, Utage Kudan, Furuyari Zukin, Tokinomiya Jikoku, Migishita Rurero, as well as Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami, right? Now, what should we do?"

"Th-this kind of thing, I don't know if it is okay for me to say it, but — now is our chance. Because of Magokoro-chan, mister fox is busy, so it's more like our only chance. You could even say there's no better chance than now."

"I understand. However, although you've just joined my side, for the seven left…… it probably won't be this easy, from here on…… It'll be more difficult."

"....."

"Even for you, with whom I'd previously met and exchanged words, I couldn't be certain. Much less for them — I honestly don't know anything about the seven left."

The Miotsukushi Sisters hated me.

Though I'd met Rurero-san,

the other four were completely unknown to me.

"It might be especially hard dealing with Konomi-chan. She

idolizes mister fox to an extreme degree. I'm sure she will be the most difficult opponent. If it's for mister fox's sake, even dying wouldn't bother her."

"Even so, for now, his *limbs*, the *Thirteen Stairs* — I want to seal them. Also, if possible..."

"If possible?"

"No, if possible…… it's a vague plan, but — even if the negotiations with you went badly, I thought I'd make **direct contact** with Kino-san, Rurero-san, and Tokinomiya Jikoku. At the very least, it can't be settled without meeting those three. Since I figured they were the ones who put those constraints on Magokoro, even if they wouldn't betray mister fox, they could at least free her from those."

"……You really care for your friend."

"Wrong. That's totally wrong. But, if she was being *restrained* by the *Thirteen Stairs* against her will... I wanted to free her from that spell."

I mean, if it went like that,

it wouldn't have been different from before.

From when she was the Magokoro I knew.

If there was one difference between now and then,

that could have been it.

"Well, in the end, without me having to do anything, she managed to escape on her own."

"……Even if she ran away, it's not like that spell was lifted — it's not like the chains or the shackles were removed. I'll say it just in case……. Kino-kun's poison will continue to affect her regardless of his death, and Rurero-san's *puppeteer* trick and Tokinomiya's *thought manipulation* basically can't be removed — just as you guessed…… That day, at the academy, Rurero-san and Tokinomiya-san were there just in case they needed to restrain Magokoro, but **it's not something that can't be done if they aren't nearby**. They can tighten up the chains if they're nearby, **but even if they're far away, the chains remain**. That's why, if you really want to remove the constraints, you do need to approach Rurero-san and Tokinomiya-san."

"Hmm……"

"Rurero-san and Tokinomiya-san's chains are outside of my expertise, so I don't know……. but for Kino-kun's *poison*, I…….. um, err, you know, I think I could do something."

"……I guess. Can I count on you?"

"I don't mind…… but, Ikkun." Emoto-san said, worried. "That spell — even if you can remove it, are you confident you could restrain Magokoro-chan?"

"Restrain……."

"Even mister fox, it's not like he put up those chains because he wanted to…….. You understand that he isn't that kind of person, right? He is not one to make others do as he wants by force…… That girl's power is too immense — too non-standard, so he had no choice."

".....In the first place, where did mister fox get Magokoro from? In my mind, she'd already died long ago — or, she should have. If I remember correctly, mister fox said he had some old acquaintances at the ER3 System or something."

"Yes. Mister fox's mentor, and an old relative, belonged to the ER3 System…….. he said it was that kind of contact, but I honestly don't really know. He only said that Magokoro was a *creation* of the branch mister fox built, MS-2……. Perhaps Kino-san, Rurero-san or Tokinomiya-san heard more details, but there is a gag order on Magokoro-chan among the *Thirteen Stairs*. So they absolutely cannot talk about it."

"Yeah — I guess that's to be expected."

It seemed the fox-masked man wanted to hide Magokoro from me, so it was natural that there would be a gag order. If Kino-san had carelessly slipped his tongue, the fox-masked man's plan would have been ruined.

Well,

even if I'd known, could I have really done anything?

At that point.

"Ah, me too, at the academy, when I talked to you, I knew about Magokoro, but I couldn't say anything……. sorry."

"It's fine, that was to be expected. It's not something to brood over.

However, that means…….. I guess if I don't hear it directly from Magokoro, I won't get anywhere. Since she's directly involved, she should know more."

"Right."

"This is just out of curiosity, but — Magokoro. She, in front of you all — what kind of personality did she have?"

"……..Since those three and mister fox were firmly guarding her, I didn't have many chances to talk, but……." Emoto-san chose her words for a bit. "……..She was a good girl."

"……."

"She was a good girl, I think."

"…….Is that so."

"I don't think — I can dislike her."

"Right."

I nodded.

"The Magokoro I know is that kind of person. Even though she's detestable and odious, for some reason, you just can't hate her……."

"……..I see."

"However... she killed Izumu-kun."

Without any mercy, she killed him.

No, not just Izumu-kun.

Even Moeta-kun, Houko-chan, and Aikawa-san — it wouldn't have been weird if they died on the spot. Those three survived simply because they had good luck.

"She didn't use to have these kinds of frightening combat abilities — she wasn't someone who could do things like that, nor was she someone who would."

"……."

"At first, I thought that mister fox **must have done something**, but that doesn't seem to be the case. You said it wasn't something he liked doing. Then, the ones who did it—"

"Yes."

Emoto-san said.

"The ER3 System's… MS-2."

"…….Awful."

"S-sorry!"

"No, not you……." I thought we'd finally be able to have a normal conversation, but I guess I was too naive. "About the ER3 System... When I was a student of the Program, I'd thought they were a bunch of nasty people……. but to turn Magokoro into **a monster like this**, that's absurd."

"……So you are mad, Ikkun."

Should I make contact with Kokoromi-sensei?

Miyoshi Kokoromi.

She occupied an important position in MS-2's *Orange Seed* development project. At a relatively early stage of the plan, she retired from the ER3 System and was removed as a Project Member — but, in the first place, Magokoro's naming origin was the name Kokoromi.

Maybe she knew something.

I didn't know what Sensei was currently doing……. I'd thought she returned to the ER3 System, but……..

She was someone I really wanted not to see again……..

The second most, after Maki-san.

Now that Maki-san was deceased, she was in first place, huh.

".....From now on, what should I do? Should I immediately release Magokoro-chan from Kino-kun's *poison*?"

"No…….. hearing that just now, I guess it's not something to take lightly. I want to ascertain the situation a bit more. I need to hear Magokoro's side of the story…… So, I want to entrust another job to Emoto-san."

"What is it…… I-if it's something I can do."

"Then, Emoto-san. Please help me meet the other *Thirteen Stairs*. Please introduce me to them. If possible — one by one."

"Pluck... the limbs."

"Yes. From here on, it'll be hard, but — I still want a peaceful resolution with everyone from the *Thirteen Stairs*. Since betrayal is something I hate doing and being done to me, I can't force them — but, even the Miotsukushi Sisters aiming for me, and even Ichirizuka Konomi who is wholeheartedly devoted to mister fox — without exception, I want to conclude the conflict with them peacefully. And

—"

If possible, with mister fox too.

I didn't say that much.

That much, even I couldn't say.

"But……. I a-am not t-that close to the recent members of *Thirteen Stairs*……. All of them might be impossible……."

"Naturally, as much as you can is enough."

"……..Understood."

Emoto-san stood up from the bench.

Took off the hood of her raincoat.

"Then, first, let me see…….. since there is the matter with Magokoro-chan, yeah. I will first have you meet Rurero-san."

Rurero-san.

Migishita Rurero.

"Can you do it? Rurero-san is one of the few who joined recently, isn't she?"

"The only old members left are Kudan-san and Konomi-chan, but Konomi-chan would be too much to begin with, and I don't know where Kudan-san currently is. But I just treated Rurero-san's injuries, so it's fine. For now, she shouldn't be able to use her *Puppeteer* powers, so she's easy to meet. The faster the better."

"Is Rurero-san hospitalized?"

"Rurero-san isn't someone who can get hospitalized. So, with mister fox's connections, at a certain place — no, I shouldn't talk about it yet. Tomorrow…… do you have time?"

"I do."

"But you are a university student, aren't you?"

"I'll be absent for a while."

"……..You should go to school seriously."

For some reason, I was told something ordinary.

She really liked joking.

"Then…… Tomorrow, at nine, c-can we meet here again again? Somehow, I'll arrange things to let you meet Rurero-san. It would be bad if mister fox got in the way."

"……..True."

"It should take some more time to deal with Magokoro-chan running away, so I don't think we have to be that careful."

"Then, I'm counting on you."

"Yes. Leave it…… to me."

I, too, stood up from the bench.

Tomorrow…… huh.

Then — until tomorrow,

I should do what I needed to do.

Magokoro.

Omokage... Magokoro.

I…… to you.

I need to apologize to you.

3

I returned to the apartment.

Hikari-san and Magokoro were there.

Both of them in maid clothes.

"....."

What kind of paradise was this?

I was completely dumbfounded.

"There weren't many outfits that fit Magokoro-san…….. That being said, it would have been bad to leave her in underwear and leggings, but master's clothes are too big, while her stature is about the same as mine."

".....Then lend her your normal clothes."

"Ara."

Hikari-san giggled.

"That was also a solution."

"....."

Why are you finding this funny?

Don't you understand the current situation?

Behaving this carefreely...

…….And.

Then,

"Ii-chan!"

There, Magokoro —

Magokoro wedged herself between me and Hikari-san.

"How is it!? Do these clothes fit ore-sama!?"

".....They fit you."

Though I wondered how that benefitted her.

For starters, I answered thusly.

"Is that so! ore-sama is happy!"

And,

Magokoro looked as if she was truly happy.

She hugged herself.

"Heheheh! Ii-chan, I like you!"

".....Yeah. I like you too, Magokoro." I said. "Therefore, instead of roaming around this narrow room in those bulky clothes, you should sit down."

"Mmh. If I sit, it will get wrinkled."

"You should sit skillfully, bending your knees like Hikari-san."

"Got it. ore-sama will give it a shot."

Saying that, Magokoro,

skillfully handled her skirt and sat down flawlessly.

….She hadn't changed.

Being able to do anything immediately...

She really hadn't changed.

As if she hadn't changed at all.

There was nothing she couldn't do — The Orange Seed.

"Now."

I sat down as well and paused for a second.

"Yesterday you were tired, so you ended up mostly sleeping and we couldn't really talk……. but, now — it's been a long time, Magokoro."

"Yeah. It has."

"Errr…… Hikari-san. Did you introduce yourselves to each other?"

"Yes. Here is Omokage Magokoro."

"I know."

"Here is Chiga Hikari."

"I know."

They were really pumped up.

Why were they such kindred spirits?

What happened while I wasn't home?

In regards to Magokoro, from how she was yesterday and last time, I'd been a bit worried, but she seemed to be pretty lively.

Vivid and radiant.

Like...

Like during our ER3 days.

As if we'd returned to those days.

As if we'd gone back to that time.

Yesterday, after being discharged, meeting Kouta-san and Kunagisa and returning to the apartment — inside my room, Magokoro was there.

To be precise, she was sleeping.

Soundly sleeping.

Though she woke up a few times, she was unable to get a good grasp of things, and we were ultimately unable to have a proper talk. But today, her condition became somewhat better. That's why, before going out to meet Emoto-san at the Kyoto Imperial Garden, we'd been able to do some idle chatting — but, having Magokoro in front of me like this, you could say it was the first time.

"Ore-sama slept well."

Magokoro said as she stretched.

I didn't want her doing such ungraceful actions in maid clothes, so I thought about warning her, but I decided to hold back.

"I guess it has been a long time since ore-sama has been this refreshed. Because I was always restrained."

"It seems that you weren't treated very well at mister fox's place, Magokoro."

"That's just the usual, so I don't mind. And it's thanks to that that I was able to meet Ii-chan." Magokoro said with a carefree smile. "In the first place, I followed that fox jerk with that condition."

"That condition?"

"That he would help me meet Ii-chan."

"....."

…….I see.

Therefore — huh.

So, as I thought, at that gymnasium, Rurero-san **was a little late**.

"So — you escaped, right?"

Killing Kino-san.

Severely injuring Rurero-san.

She escaped — from mister fox's surveillance.

She ran away.

"Yeah. Ore-sama always kicked those guys around, but since I wanted to be peaceful until I met Ii-chan, I restrained myself."

".....I think I saw you once in the underground parking lot of a building in Shirosaki, though."

"Mm? …….That, I don't know."

Magokoro pouted her lips curiously.

"Ore-sama may have been asleep at that time."

"……..I see."

She was sleeping, huh.

I couldn't tell since she was wearing a mask, but that may have been true. Well, I couldn't imagine mister fox would screw up that badly.

"Heheh. I'm happy. Even in my wildest dreams, I didn't think I could meet Ii-chan again."

"Me too... I didn't think so."

But,

this was reality.

The Magokoro here existed in reality.

I could see her, hear her, and touch her.

If I thought about touching her, I could.

It was reality.

"Magokoro, you….. Since then, what happened? I thought you died."

"I don't think much happened. **Forever, that continuation continued.** The experiments trying to complete me as The Orange Seed."

".....Then, did they……. complete it?"

That frightening test.

That deed which could even frighten gods.

An act outside of humans' domain.

That research, which could be described as blasphemy to the gods.

That experiment, which could be described as a contract with the

Devil.

Magokoro,

"Ore-sama doesn't know."

She said.

"....."

"Don't make such a blatantly disappointed face. It's not something that ore-sama can decide. I don't know what I don't know, and I don't understand what I don't understand. Whether I am complete or incomplete, before I could find out — that fox jerk kidnapped me."

"Kidnapped?"

"Before I knew it, I was alone with him."

"....."

That was probably Ichirizuka Konomi's doing.

That woman's technique.

Space Creator.

I see……. He and Emoto-san said he'd used one of his connections, but, in the end, the fox-masked man just stole *The Orange Seed*, Omokage Magokoro, from where she formerly belonged, the ER3 System. That seems to be the truth.

So you're going this far, Saitou Takashi?

You're going this far...

Just to make me your enemy?

…….Well, for the fox-masked man, MS-2 is something that he'd originally created, so it wasn't that strange for him to feel a sense of ownership over Magokoro.

However, it was still weird.

Ignoring Magokoro.

"Magokoro….. do you remember that day?"

"Which day?"

".....The day we met at that academy."

"Ore-sama remembers meeting you, but apart from that, not much. Mmm. Somehow, I feel like I went on a rampage, but that is all."

"I see. Just that much, huh."

Her memory... vanished.

She wasn't playing dumb, was she?

In this situation.

Rather, there were other causes that I could think of.

"Yeah, errr — it was a lot of trouble. For you, too. Anyway, just rest up for a bit. You must not have had time to rest properly until now."

"Well, yes. It was pretty hard for ore-sama, being confined is such a gloomy place. But, that's just as usual, so I am fine."

"....."

'As usual'.

'Fine'.

"Ore-sama is used to it."

"I see……."

'Used to it'.

Can't get used.

The Orange Seed.

"So — Magokoro, what are you going to do from here on out?"

"Mm?"

"After running away from mister fox and meeting me, from here on out, what are you going to do? If there's anything you want to do, I'll help you."

"I have no……. objective. Not particularly."

Magokoro said in a vacant way.

It seemed she didn't understand what I said.

"So you don't."

"There are things I want done to me and things I want not done to me, but I don't have any things I want to do or not do. I want Ii-chan to be kind to me, and I don't want any more experiments done to me, but……. apart from that, not much. Ore-sama has been like that from way back."

".....How about revenge?"

"Revenge?"

"For having restrained you until now — the ER3 System and mister fox……"

Probably,

the thing the fox-masked man was most on guard about was that.

He should have been on guard.

Dealing with Magokoro running away didn't just mean recouping the damages or treating Rurero-san's big injury — the counterplan against Magokoro would have been the main part. Being wary of one's opponent also implies hiding that wariness from them.

And he was forcibly pushing that on us.

And if he was preparing something, even more so.

It must have been quite unplanned.

"Aah, no."

But, Magokoro.

Lightly swayed her hand in front of her face.

"That kind of thing is a pain, so I'll pass."

"....."

"Because I was able to meet I-chan, ore-sama will forgive everything."

Right,

It was more unplanned than unplanned.

Neither the fox-masked man, nor the ER3 System.

None of them could change her.

She was no one's enemy.

Unchallenged and undefeated — the last one standing.

Humanity's Last, Omokage Magokoro.

"—I see."

……..I was relieved.

I didn't know what I would've done if she'd been planning revenge.

That wouldn't have been the Magokoro I knew.

But now it was all clear.

She was……. none other than Omokage Magokoro.

I felt a load off my chest.

"Then — rest well, Magokoro. There's no one here who would treat you like a toy for human experiments. You're not a tool or a guinea pig. You are — free."

"Free?"

"It means: do whatever you want."

".....Hehe."

Magokoro was bashful.

Like before, she was bashful.

"I am happy."

".....Yes. Me too — I'm happy."

"I see. So Ii-chan is happy too. Then I am twice as happy."

".....Sorry."

I softly bowed my head towards Magokoro.

And apologized.

"Sorry."

".....For what?"

Magokoro raised her thick eyebrows and made a puzzled face.

"..... I... because I thought you'd died…… Until now, I couldn't do anything for you. Sorry."

"What? That's no big deal. Nothing to apologize for. Wouldn't it have been impossible for you to find out? Everyone, the bunch from the ER3 System and that fox jerk, they all wanted to keep it a secret from Ii-chan."

".....But."

It wasn't just that.

At that time.

Even though you'd trusted me...

I couldn't answer to that

and betrayed you.

Even though I didn't like doing it or it being done to me.

"You are... strong, Magokoro."

"Um?"

"You're strong. You—"

With such a childish stature.

Thin arms and stick-like legs.

Even though she was in so much trouble.

Even though she received so much pain that I couldn't imagine it even if I tried.

That 'I forgive'.

That 'I'm fine'.

Was really — strong.

Really, **you guys** were strong.

……..Thinking back, Aikawa-san too — she was the same.

That person was certainly, as Hikari-san once said, constantly angry and used to everything — but precisely because she didn't forgive anything, in the end, she was able to forgive everything.

Therefore — the strongest.

So that was how it was?

"Not really. The strongest one is surely Ii-chan." Magokoro said. "I mean, ore-sama likes Ii-chan."

"....."

"People liked by others are strong."

"They are strong, which makes them liked?"

"No no. Because they are liked, they are strong." Magokoro said joyfully. "Look, errr, if someone comes to like you, you think you have to do your best, don't you? Your chest is filled with gratitude and, for the sake of that person, you feel like doing something, don't you? See, Hikari-san thinks so too, right?"

"Eh? Ah, yes. Exactly."

Hikari-san, who'd been left behind in the conversation, was surprised when Magokoro suddenly called her name.

"I also think that master is strong."

"....."

Even Hikari-san……

Even though I said not to be kindred spirits…….

"I…."

Magokoro,

her face became slightly dejected.

"Because the only one who ever came to like me was Ii-chan — I am weak."

"……"

"So weak it's pathetic."

".....If you say I'm the only one that likes you, then I'll like you enough for everyone else."

Six billion would be enough,

that's what Izumu-kun would have said.

"Really?"

"Really."

"I'm glad."

—And.

Having said that, **thud**, Magokoro's jaw suddenly dropped. She was on the verge of falling over, but I was somehow able to catch her before that.

".....What happened?"

"Mm……..No, I'm sleepy."

".....? Hey hey, you've already slept for so long yesterday, haven't you?"

"Yes……"

Then, once again, her jaw dropped.

"Yes, but…… for some reason, again... I'm sleepy."

"You're sleepy, but—"

Right then.

When I was about to say more to Magokoro, Hikari-san, without raising her voice, quietly sealed my mouth with her hand.

"Then, Magokoro-san. How about you go rest again? This room is small, but……. Right, master, how about using the bed in Yukariki-san's room?"

".....Right. The bed in that room is big and comfortable to sleep on." Having received those words from Hikari-san, I said to Magokoro. "Hey Magokoro. I'll say it just in case, but it's the room my disciple formerly used, so don't make too much of a mess—"

I stopped my words.

Magokoro had...

Magokoro had fallen asleep while sitting upright.

Sleeping.

"....."

".....What does this mean, Hikari-san?"

"I don't know."

Hikari-san shook her head apologetically.

"Just, since yesterday, I thought her consciousness was quite faint. So I suspect a sleeping disease — or symptoms like that."

"Sleeping disease……"

I remembered — Rizumu-chan.

Rizumu-chan, who would frequently lose consciousness all of a sudden. That was her nature as a part of the *Niounomiya Siblings of Massacre Magic*. Because of their overlapping personalities, it was inevitable.

However,

in this case,

there was no need to think about it.

"……Tokinomiya Jikoku…… I guess."

"*Tokinomiya*…… of the *Cursing Names*."

"Yes. The so-called Thought Manipulator — using techniques similar to hypnosis, it seems. And, that Tokinomiya Jikoku is controlling Magokoro's spirit."

"……Hypnosis, is it?"

"There are restraints on her mind. Seems that her collapsing in that gymnasium on that day was yet another rule, but……"

That was — Migishita Rurero.

The Puppeteer and the Thought Manipulator.

Even if she'd escaped from mister fox's place...

Well, I couldn't say that nothing changed.

But, even if the chains wouldn't get any tighter.

They were still there, huh.

Emoto-san had been right.

"She's a good girl."

Looking at Magokoro, Hikari-san said the same words as Emoto-san.

"Straightforward, not twisted in the least — though her speech is a bit revolting, that's charming in itself too — and..."

"Yeah….. She really is."

"I just can't believe it. That, due to this girl, Aikawa-san — no, not just Aikawa-san……"

"Yes. I was doubtful too — but if it wasn't of her own will, it's not like I can't understand. Chains can become reins, after all."

Thinking about it,

at that time, Magokoro had been practically **sleeping**.

Even while sleeping — being able to do that much.

In other words, that meant,

that it was already decided.

"Then, then……. Saying my personal opinion at a time like this may be overly idyllic of me, but…….. To use such a cute girl as a tool…… to restrain her… It's just too cruel. That's what I think."

"……..Exactly."

About what Emoto-san had said earlier, whether we should carelessly remove the chains restraining Magokoro, I still had my doubts.

That power.

Three *Killing Names* were nothing to her.

She'd overwhelmed Aikawa Jun.

That much power — that was not even half of it.

That much violence was short of half her true power.

Maybe restraining her was necessary.

Maybe the chains were indispensable.

The fox-masked man, too.

He wasn't just doing it because he wanted to.

But.

But, even knowing that.

"That girl — she's someone I instinctively want to do something for. Like Hime-chan, or Kunagisa."

"…….Do you want... to save her?"

"It's my main defect. Unnecessarily meddling in."

"Fufu." Hikari-san faintly laughed. "Are you trying to make me say the same thing again?"

"No. Kunagisa said something similar yesterday too, so please spare me. ……..Um, Hikari-san."

"What is it?"

"May I hold something heavier than chopsticks?"

Hikari-san was confused for an instant before catching on and smiling gently.

"Please."

Saying that, she smoothly opened the door of the room.

I,

firstly, took off Magokoro's clothes,

untied her orange braids,

then held her small body with both arms.

Holding her.

Then, passing by Hikari-san, I went to the hallway.

Light.

As if I was carrying nothing.

Light like a feather.

Light like a heart.

Hikari-san closed the door and followed me.

Overtaking me at the stairs' landing, one step ahead of me, she went towards Hime-chan's room on the first floor.

She opened the door and waited for me.

"……Huh? Was the door unlocked?"

"Yes. Ever since master left it open last time."

"So it's been open all this time……."

Outside of her job, this person was surprisingly sloppy.

Well, in the first place, the key went missing when Hime-chan died, and I couldn't open and close it myself unless I used the anti lock blade, so Hikari-san had no choice other than to leave it open.

Anyway.

Entering the room, I put Magokoro to sleep on top of the bed.

Putting the duvet over her, I quietly left.

"Good night."

Now, rest.

You have that right.

Ever since being born...

Without rest, without the chance to rest,

You, who's been continually used.

".....In reality, even while saying all that, in the bottom of my heart, until just earlier, I'd been thinking various things—"

Cunning things,

sly things,

filthy things,

dirty things.

I'd been thinking about a lot and a lot of things, but —

I gave up on all that.

I swore.

I, and only I, would not use you.

I would not use your existence.

As a trump card against the fox-masked man,

I'd refrain from using you.

I didn't know how the fox-masked man intended to use Aikawa-san, Overkill Red, as a trump card — but I would just protect The Orange Seed as a trump card.

Just watch from a safe place.

Like usual, be an observer.

Let's do this without any trump cards.

First,

I will set you free.

Truly free.

Real freedom.

"Hikari-san."

"What is it?"

"From here on, I think there'll be a lot of times when I'll be away from the apartment……. So please, continue to take care of her for a while."

"…….As you say."

We both left the room.

Aah, I need to lock the door behind me……

Or maybe even make a duplicate key.

With a lock like that, it'd be simple even without the original.

Returning to the first floor.

"Aah."

I stopped walking.

Right, just in case.

Or how should I put it, just to be sure.

While passing by it,
I knocked on the door of Nanananami's room.
No answer.
But she should've been here on Tuesday at this hour.
I knocked once again, and without waiting for an answer,
"I'm counting on you for next door."
I said.
There was still no answer.
But she'd surely heard me.
Then, it would be fine.

ACT 14 - UNSIGNED

FURUYARI ZUKIN
SWORDSMITH

0

Between regretting what I've done and regretting what I haven't, I choose to do and regret — then, between not regretting what you've done and not regretting what you haven't, which will you choose?

1

In the end, my meeting with the *Thirteen Stairs*' Puppeteer, Migishita Rurero-san would come to be on Saturday the fifteenth.

Since then, her condition had worsened.

Putting it simply, she had entered into critical condition.

"I'm sorry."

On the twelfth of October, one hour earlier than the appointed time of 9 in the morning, Emoto-san was already before the Imperial Garden's Kenreimon, wearing the same raincoat as yesterday. The first thing she did was apologize.

"Her wounds in and of themselves shouldn't put her life in danger……. but it seems her mind is confused. As time passed, she'd calmed down, but her fear has revived…… I think. I guess calling it backflash would make it easier to understand for normal people……."

"Is that so……"

"Because it was Rurero-san we were talking about, I thought she would eventually be fine if we left her alone, but now visitors are

strictly forbidden. Even mister fox."

"....."

"I'm sorry. But I am a doctor."

Though it was still temperate, still reserved, that was the first time I'd seen Emoto-san show such a strong will.

Naturally, I had no objections. If it was something involving her health, I wouldn't force her. And in the first place, it wouldn't mean anything to me if I met her when she wasn't in a state to hold a conversation.

"From what I can judge…….. it should be impossible for at least three more days. I think Rurero-san should calm down in three days. So…….. um, the fifteenth. I can't be certain, I can't make an absolute promise, but for now, wait until the fifteenth. Please wait."

"Understood. I'll do as you say. …….But, Emoto-san, what's that bandage around your left wrist?"

"Eh? That?"

Emoto-san raised her left arm slightly.

"Aah…… Um, errr, you see. I couldn't bear the mental pressure of betraying someone, so I slashed my wrists a few times."

"....."

Thinking about it, I'd made Emoto-san into a trojan horse, a spy……. In a position where, even though she was working for me, she still hadn't officially left the *Thirteen Stairs*. Unless you were someone like Neo-san, it was natural to feel a huge amount of pressure.

"Su-suicide attempts……"

"Ah, don't get it wrong. Suicide and wrist slashing are different. This is just an immediate stress reliever."

Emoto-san said, with a shy smile.

That logic was frightening enough to make my hair stand.

"Wi-with wrist slashing, no more lashing."

"....."

On top of being stupid, I couldn't even laugh.

Rather, on a more fundamental level, could someone unable to lie like her really play the role of a trojan horse? Inside my heart, a dark

cloud of doubt had started rising.

"I…... fine. It's fine. It is fine."

"No, but…… Even if you say so."

"I'm always suspicious, so even if I act suspiciously, no one will doubt me."

"I see……"

It fit her well.

In exchange for not lying, she was not believed even when telling the truth……

And she was also aware of it.

It was somehow worse than I thought…….

"D….. don't worry. You shouldn't worry. Ikkun. It's not something Ikkun should be worried about. This is…… um, something I'm doing o-of my own will, so you don't have to pay any mind to it."

".....Right."

I... shouldn't interject.

The scope of when I could do that was already over.

That was something I'd decided from the start.

I wouldn't — force anyone.

Not Magokoro.

Not anyone, I would absolutely not force anyone.

"Then……. Um, Emoto-san. The fifteenth, at the same hour, here — is that fine with you? Since it'll be a Sunday, the Imperial Garden will be a little crowded, but there shouldn't be any problems in the early morning."

"Yes. Understood."

"By the way, Emoto-san — what kind of role do people currently have in the *Thirteen Stairs*? Do you know the roles of anyone aside from Rurero-san?"

"No….. Since she went into critical condition, I've been stuck to Rurero-san. I don't know the details of what the others are doing……"

Hearing a bit more about it, it seemed the fox-masked man was sending the *Thirteen Stairs* here and there individually and not gathering them in a single place.

Going around other places seemed to be literal. Since I didn't

intend to see the fox-masked man yet, I didn't mind it.

"Is that so. Then, though I know it's a lot of pressure, please continue to hide among the *Thirteen Stairs*. I'd be thankful if you informed me when they make a concrete move."

"Yes. I will do that."

"The ones whose actions interest me the most are the ones hunting me, the Miotsukushi Sisters, Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami…… But they still haven't even tried to appear before me. I'm also very curious about Utage Kudan and Furuyari Zukin."

"Yes. I guess." Agreed Emoto-san. "Then…… Sorry, I need to return to where Rurero-san is. I can't let her spend too much time alone."

"……..Is it that bad?"

By Magokoro,

the wound she received from Omokage Magokoro.

Is it that severe?

"No……. But even if it's not the case, I would feel bad leaving a mentally weakened person alone. Someone has to hold their hand."

"……."

Though her personality was absurd……

She was still a doctor. That's what I thought.

She was self-aware of that.

Really…….. She hit every single right point.

How nasty.

"Then…….. Can you tell me the place she's staying at, just in case? Since I don't know what might happen to you from here on, I want to at least have that information."

"……."

"It's fine, I won't go meet her uninvited. I promise I won't see Rurero-san without your authorization as a doctor."

"……..It's a place you know very well."

Emoto-san said, after hesitating a bit.

"The research facility of the late university Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku — the place formerly known as the Saitou Clinic."

"Saitou..."

I was... lost for words.

It was — a place that was done already.

A place that no longer had any connections to the Story.

The place where Madoka Kuchiha.

Where Kigamine Yaku.

Where Niounomiya Izumu and Niounomiya Rizumu.

And where Yukariki Ichihime...

Died.

Where they were killed.

I see…… that place would have been very far from my range of actions and, from the fox-masked man's perspective, it would have been on the outside of destiny as well. For injured people to rest and heal — it might have been the best place imaginable.

And it was also originally a clinic.

Though it might have been simplistic, it was still a medical facility. At the very least, there would've been the minimum amount of equipment required to *study* Kuchiha-chan's body.

How should I say it; in a way, choosing that place as a resting spot was cowardly of him, however, it was a despicably good move. Even during the chaos of Magokoro's escape — as expected of Humanity's Worst, I guess.

Anyhow.

The meeting with Rurero-san got put off to the fifteenth. It seemed Emoto-san wouldn't be able to move until then either, so naturally, without being able to meet any other *Thirteen Stairs*,

I was given a three day extension.

Blank.

Honestly, I didn't know how to handle an extension in the midst of such a busy time.

Magokoro was asleep most of the time, so I couldn't ask her more.

Since then, Magokoro had really spent her time sleeping. She slept so deeply on Hime-chan's bed that I had to wonder if her eyes would start to rot.

It seemed that Kino-san's *poison* wasn't a hindrance to living an everyday life, and Rurero-san's wasn't much of a problem as long as it

wasn't activated, but we needed to do something about Tokinomiya's *spell* quickly, I thought.

Cursing Names, huh……..

I had already learned a lot about **that world**'s behind the scenes from Moeta-kun, but because of Ichirizuka Konomi's *Space Creation*, he was cut off before he started to explain the *Cursing Names*.

The two *Cursing Names* among the *Thirteen Stairs* were Kino Raichi and Tokinomiya Jikoku. Magokoro had already — already killed Kino-san, so there was only one *Cursing Name* left, Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Other than bringing Rurero-san to me, I'd also intended to have Emoto-san help me meet the rest of the *Thirteen Stairs*, but —

I couldn't sit around without doing or planning anything.

The mummy hunter himself becomes a mummy — that was also a possibility.

I needed to be careful about that.

Well, judging from the situation, it seemed like I wouldn't meet Tokinomiya Jikoku for a while, so I'd worry about that later.

That was why, for now, about Magokoro, as Emoto-san had said, we'd have to grasp the situation better — rather, we'd put releasing Magokoro's chains on hold until we consulted both Rurero-san and Tokinomiya Jikoku. It wasn't just because we needed to be cautious before releasing such an immense power, but since three different chains were linked, I thought they might have been literally linked together.

So, for the time being.

On the first day of the extension.

Me and Hikari-san,

once again went to Shinkyogoku.

An OPA near the four-way intersection along Kawahara street.

leaving Magokoro to Nanananami,

we went shopping together.

Of course, it wasn't as carefree as it sounded.

First — there was daily life.

We went to buy clothes for Magokoro.

We couldn't let her stay in maid clothes forever.

Just leggings would be even worse.

Also, a toothbrush, a towel, and what a person needed apart from clothes to live.

I'd initially thought Hikari-san would suffice alone for this task, but apparently, according to her 'I would not be able to understand Magokoro-san's tastes by myself, so it would help if you could accompany me.', so we went together.

"Hair—"

"Eh?"

"Her hair, it really stands out, doesn't it? Her pupils, too."

"Ah, yeah. That's right. Even if not as much as Kunagisa's blue, orange is a bit of an unusual hair color."

"Magokoro-san probably won't just continue to sleep forever, so when she wakes up, we can't possibly ask her to stay in her room all the time, could we? Also, she needs to take baths and such."

"Well, I guess."

"Then, wouldn't it be better to dye her hair?"

"Dye, huh……."

I crossed my arms.

Those braids.

That orange hair — beautifully reflecting the daylight.

Magokoro's favorite.

She said it was her favorite part of her body.

".....I think she'd hate that."

"Is that so…… For reference, what do you usually do with Tomo-san's hair and pupils?"

"She's not the type to worry about other people's eyes. Also, she doesn't go outside often in the first place."

"Aah…….. right."

"When she absolutely had to, though that's when she was a kid, when it was really bad to stand out, she wore a hat and sunglasses."

"Hm."

"Aah, that reminds me. At first, the fox-masked man made Magokoro wear a mask and a baseball cap."

"I don't like the mask, but — let me see, a hat…… may work. Then

let's buy a hat and sunglasses."

"Yeah."

Well, for the fox-masked man, it was probably obvious that Magokoro was at my place, but even then, we didn't need to expressly make her stand out. We needed to be at least that careful.

As expected of the skillful Hikari-san, aside from asking me for advice two or three times, without having me hold any bags, our shopping had concluded in just about three hours.

To not directly go home, we entrusted our recently bought articles to a coin locker and hung around Shinkyogoku.

Ummm.

Well, how should I say it.

Though it was a misunderstanding.

Though I understood I was mistaken.

It had been the first time in a long while —

a peaceful and relaxed time.

"........How peaceful."

Hikari-san said it too.

While looking at all the people walking on the streets.

"It's hard to imagine that there is someone saying absurd things like ending the world."

"I completely agree."

"Yes. Rather, it's not whether such a person exists, but how could someone think like that — that's what I don't understand."

"....."

"It's not like there isn't any tragedy or misfortune, but isn't the world fundamentally kind? Of course, that might just be limited to me and the people around me, and there may be many more tragic and awful things out there, but I really can't believe that the world has any reason to end."

"It's probably not a reason, but an objective. What Saitou Takashi wishes for, no — rather than wishing, he's probably in the midst of searching for it. Trying to find it. Magokoro and I are probably just a part of it — making me his enemy is nothing more than one course of events."

"The end... of the world."

"Well……. For the fox-masked man, what you and I are talking about is definitely completely off-topic. The point we're questioning is off. For the fox-masked man, **wanting to read an interesting novel until the end is only natural**; that's probably the extent of his feelings."

"....."

"Not just reading the same page again and again, he quickly wants to finish it, this world known as the Story. You could say that his experiment... is somewhat like speed reading."

"Speed reading……."

Right.

That was accelerating.

"The world is interesting — that's what he said. Hey, Hikari-san. Among the people living in this world, among those six billion people, just how many can say those words? Precisely. 'It's peaceful', or something like that, even we can say it. But…….. There aren't many in this world who can honestly affirm that they find the world unbelievably interesting."

".....Right. Also……." Hikari-san looked down. "That's not the line of someone like Saitou Takashi, who has led a dramatic life. In that sense, it is far from the normal course of things."

"Also, he said that he doesn't want to die. It seems that was the origin. He doesn't want to see this interesting world off half-assedly right in the middle — he wants to live until the world ends. The ER3 System…….. At that time called the ER2 System, he entered that organization during his days as a young boy, but maybe that wasn't a good thing. He was too greedy--- too young, and unfortunately, he was too qualified."

"But……. Isn't that a contradiction? His experiment of trying to end the world and his wish to not die."

"They’re the same thing. For Saitou Takashi, the theory behind the two are the same. If he can see the world's end, he doesn't mind dying — and, he can't die without having seen the world's end. Either not dying or seeing the world's end, those were two choices — no, two of

the same choice, I should say."

"....."

Hikari-san made an unusually disgusted expression, as if she'd had enough.

"It's absurd."

"As expected of Aikawa Jun's father, we might say."

"I… don't really want to believe that, though. Aikawa-san — she isn't that kind of person."

"But they definitely share an absolute root. Conceit all the way from heaven to earth, you might call it. I've thought about it a lot……. but if there's any difference between those two — that is probably the existence of a clear objective, or lack thereof."

"What do you mean?"

"To put it simply, well, ten years ago, those two died. Well, in reality, they revived like in a manga, but because of that, those two **were expelled from causality** — said Saitou Takashi. They are alive, but it's almost like they died — I think that was the meaning."

"Haah."

"The problem is in the difference in their actions after that. Saitou Takashi chose a different method of achieving his objective, by trial and error. In that ten year gap, he said he tried a lot of things. For that, he needed limbs."

"Limbs — The *Thirteen Stairs*, is it?"

"I don't know when that name started being used, but — that's right. He needed limbs to take his part in the Story. Contrary to that, Aikawa-san chose the way of becoming other people's limbs."

".....A contractor."

"Yes…… that's probably the difference between Saitou Takashi, who held an objective, and Aikawa-san, who was created for that objective……. Ah, no, sorry, it's not like I'm going somewhere with this. It's just what I think."

"That would mean... until we stop Saitou Takashi's objective itself — this will never end. **This thing**... would never end."

"Exactly. I thought that last month, when I was called to Sumiyuri Academy, it was in order for us to settle things with each other, but —

thinking about it now, that was just rationalizing it."

"Rationalizing?"

"The fox-masked man may use another word for it……. but essentially, it's like when Miiko-san was involved. Saitou Takashi wanted a link between us, a connection between him and me, he wanted to make it **clear** — that's what I think. Using Magokoro. You could see Magokoro's appearance as just an event to introduce himself."

"....."

"He said that Izumu-kun's involvement became necessary. Originally, he wanted to let him retire, but the fox-masked man forcibly put Izumu-kun on the stage. That was to show me Magokoro's power, Magokoro's overwhelming power…….. The part of Magokoro that changed….. probably. Because it seems he didn't intend to let us meet, the current situation is unexpected for the fox-masked man……."

"Then, what should we do to end it?" Hikari-san said, as if she was troubled. "An end to his objective……. That is pretty vague. Too vague, like drawing on muddy water. Even if we fail multiple times, the fox-masked man will probably try again as many times as he can."

"Yeah. At the very least, that's what he's done until now. Therefore, even if he throws away the theory of making me his enemy, he'll just choose another means. If you ask me, it's a vicious cycle."

"I think so too."

"If possible, I want to stop that vicious cycle……."

"But — you can't kill him, can you?"

Hikari-san said.

"Repeating your words from earlier, unless the world ends or he dies, Saitou Takashi won't stop. But you — you cannot kill people, I think."

"You don't know me enough, Hikari-san. If it's absolutely necessary — even I..."

"Can you kill? Really, absolutely, without any doubt, if you say you can kill, can you?"

"No, I'm sorry, I can't kill."

I ended up yielding in front of that barrage of questions.

Before, I would have left it uncertain.

Now, I.

I recognized that I had people I wanted to protect.

I'm sure I couldn't kill.

I probably couldn't kill people.

That — I needed to be aware of it.

I needed to be sharply aware of it.

For other people's sake,

for my sake,

the me who thought he could kill people —

was surely no more.

Not anywhere.

"……Um."

Hikari-san reformulated.

"Just one thing — could I ask one thing that trespasses my authority?"

"Anything."

"But it's a question that goes far above my rights as an attendant."

"Please, don't mind it. It's between Hikari-san and I."

"How did you get close to Magokoro-san?"

"……"

It was a shock to be asked that so smoothly. Because I didn't think it would be that kind of question, my words got stuck for a moment.

But — it wasn't really something I had to hide.

It wasn't something to hide at this point.

From here on, Magokoro would surely cause Hikari-san trouble, so I probably needed to tell her, actually.

I,

"Err, you see."

I cut right to the point, without getting worked up.

"It's an old story, so my memories of it are pretty vague — the details of when I was at the ER3 System……. Maybe you already know, but I'll explain it just in case. When I was in middle school, I

caused the Kunagisa Syndicate some trouble."

"Was Tomo-san involved?"

"She was. Both Kunagisa and her brother, Kunagisa Nao — it seems he was recently promoted to the top of the organization — as well as Nao-san's friend, Kasumioka Douji; they were the main cast for me. Well, the result of that trouble was wretched and unsightly — the poor and good-for-nothing Nonsense User inevitably had to escape to another country."

"……..Was Tomo-san's isolation a result of that incident too?"

"Generally, yes. Though it wasn't really the result of a defeat... No, I guess it's kinda similar. In the end, Nao-san was the only one to come out of it unscathed. Kasumioka-san is... currently missing."

Missing. I didn't know how accurate those words are, but that's what I said. With Nao-san becoming the chairman and Kunagisa coming back to the organization, I wondered how he would be treated — it was something I was personally curious about, but in the end, I was outside of the net. Even if I came to know something, it would probably be as a result of it ending.

"Escaping overseas — through Nao-san's guidance. Parting with Kunagisa, all alone. So I participated in the ER3 System's ER Program, the abroad student program……."

"Yes, I am aware. So, there — you met Magokoro?" Hikari-san said, unsatisfied. "But……. Then, wouldn't that mean that Magokoro-san is of the same age or older than master? Magokoro-san doesn't look to be that old at all."

"……."

I wanted to tell her to look in a mirror.

Hikari-san, who looked about as old as a middle schooler.

Twenty seven years old.

Also,

"The same as — Kunagisa Tomo."

"Ah…… Right. That's right, thinking about it, Tomo-san too — she is of the same age as master."

"Yes……. Well, returning to the main point. I passed the exam and moved to the other side of the world. I lived in a dormitory and

Omokage Magokoro was in the same room."

".....I heard that the ER Program's exam was quite difficult."

"Yeah, so it seems."

"You were smart, master."

"No, it really was a hard exam. But, for me — it was simple."

Right, simple.

Too simple.

For me.

Compared to living.

"Perhaps Nao-san did some shady deals behind the scenes." I jokingly said, and continued to talk. "We lived in the same room — but I later learned that Magokoro wasn't really an abroad student from Japan that passed the exam."

".....The Orange Seed."

"Yes — an experimental subject."

MS-2.

The section inherited from Saitou Takashi.

The place that had previously created Aikawa Jun.

The Holy Land and the Hell that gave birth to Humanity's Strongest.

"Even though she was an experimental subject, she wasn't confined all year and treated like a guinea pig — rather, seeing how she would act in everyday life and in society interested them much more. Maybe situational reaction experiments were the main goal."

"Master, when did you learn that?"

"Learned what?"

"That Magokoro was an experimental subject."

Like Kuchiha-chan,

or Utsurigi.

"After we got along well, I heard about it from an adult."

".....So they didn't hide it?"

"It seemed more like an open secret. Even apart from Magokoro, it seemed there were other test subjects in the program. I'm not that knowledgeable about that…….. I don't think there were that many…….. but among them — Magokoro was off the charts."

"Off... the charts."

"The final form of humanity."

I said, while remembering the past.

"In that sense, maybe experimental subject isn't a very fitting word. Not an experimental subject or a test subject but — a complete subject."

"....."

"Even then, from what I could see, Omokage Magokoro wasn't as powerful as Aikawa Jun, though—"

Though there was no way the me of that time had understood that,

now I understood.

Thinking rationally, MS-2 was —

trying to artificially recreate Aikawa Jun.

It matched timewise.

It was after the accident with Aikawa-san and Saitou Takashi, which Aikawa Junya and Kajou Akira had also been involved in — a few years after that.

Same as when Assistant Professor Kigamine continued using Kuchiha-chan, even after Saitou Takashi had left — MS-2 had continued using Magokoro after Saitou Takashi left them.

……..

The words 'root of all evil' come to my mind.

That was probably accurate.

The causality that person, Saitou Takashi, left behind in this world, before he was expelled from it… it's just too awful.

Well……. That was why.

That was why I thought that, between Saitou Takashi and Zerozaki Hitoshiki, there must have been something concrete that could serve as a weapon if I learned of it.

That's why I was waiting for the result of Kouta-san's research.

"Trying to recreate Aikawa-san…….. Is it? But why would they—"

"Probably with the same logic as kids creating plastic models of battleships. There is no reason. That's how the ER3 System is. I, after entering it, I understood it very well. Very well. Those guys have no

objective. In that sense, they might have been continuing after Saitou Takashi, who was their opposite—"

Having no pride.

Holding no integrity.

Keeping no attachments.

Expressing no complaints.

That broken ER3 System's four clauses.

He drew a firm line between him and the *Killing Names*, the *Cursing Names*, The Four Gods and One Mirror, the Kunagisa Syndicate and all the other residents of those hidden worlds. He operated as nothing more than a common person.

But, just because he was a common person didn't mean he was inferior.

Moeta-kun had said it too, but in the end, he was the resident of the *Normal World* who held the most power.

A normal... scariness.

He had no principles or contention.

"On the same level as wishing to see the end of the world, they aimlessly tried to recreate Aikawa Jun. I'm sure of it. That train of thought, naturally, it's not like I can't understand it. Wanting to be able to run fast or do hard calculations, just like those childish aspirations — it's precisely because they lack concreteness that they hold the same weight as an objective to them. That's how it is, Hikari-san. It's the same principle as your original master gathering geniuses on her island."

"If you explain it like that, I can't possibly say anything back."

It's cowardly, said Hikari-san, puffing her cheeks.

Cute.

If she did a face like that, I couldn't say anything back either.

"Anyway, Magokoro was an important goal in the ER3 System's research — and its conclusion. …….Let's talk about that after stuffing our stomachs a bit more."

"……?"

"It seems that I had a role to play in MS-2's research myself. Magokoro's supervisor and caretaker."

".....Were you doing it on purpose?"

"No, I was unaware. I thought I was simply hanging out with Magokoro. At that time, I was kind of… both alive and dead. **I wasn't necessarily conscious of what I was doing**. It's just — in my mind, I'd been overlapping Kunagisa and Magokoro."

"Tomo-san..."

"Ever since I was a kid, I've been someone with a lot of lingering attachment. The kind that could only measure anyone with myself or Kunagisa as a comparison."

Though I'd been doing the same with Kunagisa.

Little sister.

At the core there is my little sister's…….. existence.

"But, well, because of that, we were able to become friends. Though I don't know when we got closer or the details of how our friendship had started, but that's natural."

".....Maybe that's just how human relationships are."

"But, that wasn't good." I said. "Omokage Magokoro, *The Orange Seed*; I was apparently the only human who could naturally become friends with her — so I was once again seized with special attention."

"Because master can become friends with anyone."

"That again? Houko-chan said something like that too…… Could you quit it? it's not like that. I was just dull. Just a dropout. I couldn't keep up with the content of the lessons at all. I was trying to scrape by."

Makeshift was — my specialty.

I was able to get by with tricks and showboating.

The Nonsense User's real ability.

Without learning and without shame.

"And it was thanks to Magokoro that this dropout was somehow able to survive in the program. I was always under watch."

"....."

"You know, halfway through it, I'd unconsciously noticed it. That girl — **someone was doing something to her**, more than she let on. Luckily, I had some **previous knowledge** at my disposal."

Kunagisa Tomo.

A genius from birth.

Called the Blue Savant.

She was controlling the Kunagisa Syndicate from a young age.

"But….. I couldn't do anything. No, I... didn't do anything. Because I knew there was nothing I could do. I just blankly watched over her."

"That's not like you." Hikari-san said. "You say that, but I bet you did something, didn't you?"

".....A tiny bit. Just a tiny bit — I did the same thing I always do. The thing I've repeated enough times up till now to get sick of it — the very same thing."

"....."

".....But it really was just a tiny bit, right at the end. And, it didn't accomplish anything."

That's why,

it was like I didn't do anything.

"Our relationship continued until she died. The last experiment was a failure and Omokage Magokoro burned to death in a conflagration."

".....My condolences."

"No, but, she ended up surviving."

"Right. …….Why is that?"

"The only possibility I can think of is that I, the *friend*, was no longer necessary……. I became a nuisance, so the ER3 System, MS-2, faked her *death* to separate the two of us—"

But — that was unthinkable.

I saw Magokoro dying.

The orange burning,

The orange disappearing in the flames,

I witnessed it.

I was a witness.

I was a victim,

And a perpetrator.

".....Well, my relationship with Magokoro — broadly speaking, it was like that. How was it, Hikari-san? It was boring, or rather, not that big of a deal at all, wasn't it?"

"No, as I'd thought, it was too much to ask." Hikari-san said, admirably apologetic. "If I worsened your mood, please feel free to punish me however you want, master."

"....."

Sometimes, the things this person said really sounded like they were enticing me……

I felt I'd lose to that temptation someday.

Though, at the point I thought something like that, I'd already lost half the battle.

"Not really…. It's fine. I'm used to a life of exposing my shame. It's just—" I averted my eyes and said, as if talking to myself. "—Maybe it was my fault. That's what I thought…… in the end."

".....?"

"I turn my surroundings crazy just by existing it seems. According to the words of a young and gorgeous strategist, I attract misfortune and calamities. I have a constitution that attracts accidents."

"That's probably a false accusation."

"Maybe."

"And even if that really is the case, it's not your responsibility. You don't have to feel ashamed of it one bit, as it is not your fault."

"....."

"You can't get tunnel-visioned on those heroic feelings and lose sight of what you must do now, master."

".....Right."

"For starters—"

And then.

Hikari-san took my right arm.

And crossed it with her left arm.

Then softly brought her body closer.

".....!?"

"Quietly."

"Quietly, you say—"

Bre-breasts.

In reality it wasn't bad at all,

The sensation of Hikari-san's chest.

I-I can't calm down.
Don't be so confused, my heart!
Don't panic from just this much!
You aren't a middle schooler, are you…….!
"Master."
In contrast,
Hikari-san spoke in a small, whispered voice.
In a serious tone.
"Stay still and listen."
"……?
"It seems we've been followed for a while."

2

We'd ended up walking quite a bit while we were talking.

In front of me, I could see the Kyoto public office.

We came out to Oike street.

In front of me was a pedestrian crossing.

The light was red.

For now, Hikari-san and I were pretending to wait for the signal with our arms still crossed. Since the signals along the north and south directions stay on red for quite a while around here, it should give us enough time to plan for our future actions.

I see,

now that she'd said it, I realized it too.

I felt a gaze clinging to me.

Visual perception is just what the eyes see, so what I was actually feeling wasn't a gaze but a presence, I should say. But anyway, we were being tailed I think.

Thinking about it, there was a presence like that.

Though I don't know where it came from or when it started.

Anyway, someone was now behind us, a bit further away.

".....When did you notice it?"

"I just became certain of it now." Hikari-san said in a small voice, so small you could've easily missed it. The sort of voice that needed real skill to vocalize. "It's just……. I can't call it very skillful. The reason I didn't notice it until now was simply because I was focused on our conversation. Just carelessness."

"It was the same for me, too."

It was also unexpected.

They should have been in a state of emergency because Magokoro

escaped. I'd thought they wouldn't have had the time to bother with me.

Hmm……..

However……. Since we'd noticed it, the tailing was quite unskillful.

Really bad, actually.

It was an amateur. A big amateur. Even now, having stopped walking, I could tell without even having to turn back. Or maybe they were thinking that getting found out would be fine from the beginning……. No, it didn't feel like that. If they'd been upfront about it, maybe, but they were unnaturally sneaky, so it was absolutely not that.

".....Hikari-san. Soon…….. in about ten seconds, the light will turn red. What should we do?"

"We can't tell how dangerous they are……. For now, to maintain this situation, we should cross the road naturally."

"Right."

From red to green.

Hikari-san and I stepped in.

"I am more concerned for Magokoro-san than for us here."

".....Since Nanananami's at the apartment, it's fine. She's much more reliable than me."

"That's quite…… the trust you put in her."

"Because she's a witch. Other than burning her, there is no way to destroy her." I said. "And even if I am concerned by that, it's more important for now to decide how to deal with our pursuer."

"Yes……."

"What should we do in this kind of situation?"

So I asked. Regardless of whether that person was Hikari-san or Teruko-san, as one of Akagami Iria's maids, she definitely had that kind of information in her head.

"The ways of dealing with it depend on the circumstances, so I cannot speak generally, but there are usually two main choices. To put it simply, either lose them or catch them."

"Which one's more advantageous?"

"If I had to say, catching them would be better."

"Then let's do that."

We crossed the street.

Then, we went East on Oike street,

and descended underground.

Underground —

The Tozai subway line, station of Kyoto public office.

We bought two tickets.

".....Will it be alright? Even if you want to catch them, they might be a dangerous person. If I remember correctly, the Miotsukushi Sisters of the *Thirteen Stairs* were aiming for master —"

"It seems that the one tailing us is alone, so I don't think it can be them."

"Being alone may just be a lure."

"Yeah…… I didn't think of that possibility. But…….. Well, even then, that pursuer is just too shabby. It's probably too much, even for a lure."

"That's right……. Surely."

Hikari-san agreed too.

Of course, even if it was unreasonable to compare them to *Nureginu the Concealed*, that pursuer's tailing was way too horrible.

"Since we didn't notice it until a moment ago, we can't exactly afford to say something pretentious... But, even if that is bait, they're planning to do something anyway, right? Then we should create that opportunity ourselves."

"……..That composure is quite impressive."

Hikari-san smiled.

"So I will accompany you."

"If it gets dangerous, please run away alone, okay?"

"Spare me your jokes."

Passing through the ticket gate, onto the platform,

we wait in line for the train.

The train, huh.

I couldn't help but think of Moeta-kun. I unconsciously started paying close attention to our backs, but Nureginu-san was no longer

here and we weren't lined up right at the front, so that was probably an unfounded worry.

The train arrived.

It stopped.

The doors opened and the people started getting off —

Hikari-san and I entered a wagon.

The announcement signaling the departure rang.

The warning sound rang.

When the doors were just about to close, we jumped off.

The doors closed.

The train departed.

I looked next to me.

Likewise, someone else had jumped off the train.

"Ah."

It was a highschool girl.

Hair dyed brown in a modern style and a uniform with a short skirt.

Charming red glasses.

Overall, a small stature.

"....."

"....."

"....Well done."

I was praised.

…….No, why are you praising me?

"........Um, master……. Is this an acquaintance?"

"No, I don't know her….."

The suspicious Hikari-san and the bewildered me.

I really didn't know her.

Now that the train had departed and the passengers all left the station, the highschool girl struck a pose.

"Fufu! Even if you don't know me, I know you, *Ii-chan*!"

"......Hah. Is that so….."

Ah, no.

She called me *Ii-chan*.

Which meant —

"Right!"

The highschool girl said in a loud voice.

"Fifth step of the *Thirteen Stairs*! Why should I hide it — Furuyari Zukin is none other than me!"

I...

I-I don't know……. Errr……

I was amazed? No……

Speechless? Not that either…….

Yeah.

I struggled for a reaction.

".....Say something. It's embarrassing."

"No…… I just thought you were too commonplace."

"Commonplace?"

The highschool girl — Zukin-chan was astonished.

Umm…….

After a swimsuit with a lab coat, someone full of bandages, and *Nureginu the Concealed*, just a brown haired high school girl wasn't enough to establish her character.

"Don't say I can't establish my character!"

"....."

An ordinary retort.

Umm.

If I had to say, she was closer to Kino-san…….

But Kino-san was really incredible.

Then, was this girl actually incredible too?

She should have been, right?

"Fuh!"

For some reason, Zukin-chan smiled boldly.

An ordinary boldness.

"This time, you were able to see through me, but next time, it won't go like that! Remember th— "

"There's no way we'll let you escape."

Zukin-chan had already turned on her heel and was about to make a break for it when I grabbed her uniform's large collar.

"Gueh!"

It seemed I'd strangled her, but even that reaction was ordinary.

What was with that girl……

I could read her every move.

"Let go of me! Eeey! Kill me if you want!"

"Got it."

I pushed her on the railway.

Kyaah, she screamed ordinarily.

"Now, let's go, Hikari-san."

"Eh, but……."

"What? That was just an optical illusion."

"No, but……"

"An illusion, an illusion."

Climbing the stairs, we showed our tickets to the station attendant and got reimbursed. Then, taking the same route we came through, we got to the surface.

Ooh.

Now that I looked at it, the public office sure was big……

Like a castle.

"Are you trying to kill me?!"

Cheh.

So she'd followed us.

Well, I knew that there were ten minutes left until the next train.

I turned back in a melancholic mood.

"Err….. Zukin-chan? Furuyari Zukin-san?"

"Exactly."

For some reason, she put on airs.

A high-handed attitude.

"The Swordsmith?"

"Yes, that's right. So you know about me. Fufufu, I will praise you for that."

"……..I'll give you some candy, so go wait over there, Zukin-chan."

"Yaay, a candy……..Who wants that?!"

"……."

She ordinarily went along with the joke.

I was a bit surprised.

I handed her yogurt flavoured candy I had in my pocket, invited Hikari-san with my hand and got away about ten meters from Zukin-chan.

"……..What do you think?"

"I……. can't decide."

"Umm…… I can't make anything out, either."

"How is she compared to the other *Thirteen Stairs*?"

"How?…….. Well ……..It's not like I've met all of them, so I can't say much, but……"

I glanced back and looked at her.

She was licking the candy and quietly waiting.

Hmmm…… The surroundings of Shinkyogoku were teeming with high schoolers on school trips, so I was familiar with them to a certain extent, but this girl, Zukin-chan, was just too normal.

You could say she had no presence.

Her aura was like that of a background character.

"If you forced me to give my opinion, I can only see her as a high schooler……."

"Me too…… But she named herself as one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, and she called me *Ii-chan*."

"But, would *Thirteen Stairs* have someone that normal?"

"That's the problem……."

Originally, the *Thirteen Stairs* were assembled by the fox-masked man to become his limbs, so they should have been a gathering of weirdos. Even if their purpose had become to oppose me, I couldn't imagine that basic principle changed completely, that it disappeared completely. In the first place, from his way of speaking, the fox-masked man held a high impression of Furuyari Zukin as a Swordsmith……

……..Mm?

Huh, hold on.

If I remembered correctly, Furuyari Zukin……

"Don't talk sneakily! It's not manly!"

It seemed that, after finishing the candy, Zukin-chan quickly

approached us.

I said "Hey, Zukin-chan."

"I heard that Furuyari Zukin was an elder."

"....."

"That he was an elder famous for his works."

"....."

"Where are you facing?"

"W-who?"

"What?"

"Who did you hear that from!? One-sidedly assuming I'm a liar! Answer me, who'd you hear it from!?"

"Mister fox."

"That guy! That guy is the one lying."

"So you're calling him 'that guy'?"

"Fuh."

Once again, Zukin-chan ordinarily smiled boldly.

In a lively way.

I prepared myself, ready to hear some important facts, but Zukin-chan just kept pointing at me without uttering a word. Eventually, she powerlessly dropped her finger.

".....?"

".....E-errr."

She'd immediately become unsure.

"Um…… It's because I'm the twelfth."

"What?"

"Mister fox was talking about the eleventh one."

"..... Err…… In other words." I hastily tried to process it. ".....You, Furuyari Zukin the Swordsmith, are the twelfth one, is that it?"

"Yes."

She was clearly playing the kid.

She was cute, but merely just cute, so she wasn't really that cute.

However — the twelfth one?

What was this highschool girl saying?

".....What do you mean?"

I had to ask.

Zukin-chan quickly lowered her gaze and said.

"You, are you by any chance a person that can keep secrets?"

Enough with the performance, just hurry up and say it.

Well, I'll go along with your act. I quietly nodded. This time, she really did say a shocking truth.

"**I am my grandfather's replacement**."

"……Replacement?"

Replacement — representative?

Alternative...?

"Grandpa was the eleventh, and last month……. Err, I think it was last month, he entered that *Thirteen Stairs* thing. Invited by mister fox."

"Yeah."

Errr……. Since Furuyari Zukin was the fifth step, mister fox must have contacted them quite early on. Of course, even mister fox wouldn't have decided on the later members of *Thirteen Stairs* randomly, so he'd probably known them from beforehand……

"But grandpa, his health hadn't been that great recently. So I had to care for him."

"Care? You had? Zukin-chan had?"

"Can't be helped. We have no other relatives. And we can't really put the legendary swordsmith in a retirement home."

"……"

Seeing her saying that bashfully, I got a slightly better impression of her.

So she was a grandpa's kid…….

I felt like her character had finally been established a bit.

"We're basically always behind the scenes, so that was fine…… But beginning with this month, his health started getting really bad."

"And?"

"He died."

"……"

That was heavy……..

She casually talked about such a heavy thing.

That was a surprise attack.

"So, I'm the replacement."

"……Yeah."

"Since I'm the twelfth."

"…..Yeah."

"Hihii."

"……."

Err…… What should I say?

It was certainly typical of mister fox, but……..

It was a sloppiness typical of mister fox, but……

"We probably should have had Emoto-san look at him. But grandpa hated doctors. Well, he was able to live to ninety-eight, so it was a peaceful death."

"……..That was an ordinary comment, too."

Saying that, I decided to ask what I'd been curious about. If we were to ask something critical, we would normally be digging our graves. However, this girl seemed airheaded, so it should've been fine to some extent.

"Um, errrr, do other members of the *Thirteen Stairs* know about you replacing your grandfather?"

"Mm? No, I still haven't met any other people. I also just heard about Emoto-san from mister fox. That she was a person of character, very refined and cool; an extremely splendid doctor."

"……."

Why was he fooling her, that man?

Unconsciously lying all the time.

"Mister fox should have introduced me to everyone already, but some trouble happened and there hasn't been a good time. So unless mister fox mentioned it to everyone, I guess they don't know?"

"Hmm……."

Then I could understand why Emoto-san didn't say a word about it when we were talking at the Imperial Garden.

I think that the *trouble* she was referring to was Magokoro's escape……. But perhaps Zukin-chan didn't know about that? No, it was dubious whether she even knew about Magokoro in the first place.

The fox-masked man — was he hiding it?

Setting aside whether it was meaningless or not.

Then I shouldn't touch upon that carelessly.

Alternative……. huh.

She was probably here just to fill in the numbers, and the fox-masked man has no intention of making her participate in this battle. Izumu-kun probably only knew about the eleventh one too.

".....Well, it's fine."

I sighed.

I kinda didn't care.

I felt like I'd been strained for no reason.

"Then let's go home, Hikari-san."

"Eh…… Ah, but we need to ask why she was tailing us."

"Ah, right. Hey Zukin-chan, why did you?"

"Don't ask as if you don't care!"

I was ordinarily retorted at.

I didn't take any damage…….

"Was it mister fox's order?"

"Wrong! It's my will!"

"Heeh……"

Was she kind of angry?

Maybe she was just full of energy.

Zukin-chan continued in an enthusiastic tone.

"When I went to the city for once to buy some things, I coincidentally happened to spot you, *Ii-chan*!"

"....."

What an unpleasant coincidence……..

But I didn't think that she'd been following us since we left the rundown apartment, so it was probably as she'd said.

I was beat.

Since the *Thirteen Stairs* were currently scattered all over the place, well, among the possible coincidences, it was one of the more passable ones……. She ended up being harmless, so that might've been somewhat of a silver lining.

"So — having spotted the *enemy*, as one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, you couldn't overlook it…… Is that how it is?"

In front of the Kyoto public building.

To enter a fight here — there were too many people.

Too many witnesses.

I think it would've been impossible.

But this situation.

This situation.

That bunch had even entered the hospital.

So it wasn't unthinkable.

"Of course that's not the case!"

"....."

I was met with a severe retort.

I took no damage, but it was shocking.

".....Is that wrong?"

"Yes! I entered the *Thirteen Stairs* because Mister fox said I didn't have to do anything!"

"Aah……. So that's how it is."

If you thought about it normally, that's how it should've been.

She was a high schooler.

She hadn't commuted to Sumiyuri Academy.

She didn't seem to be immortal, either.

"So…. Then, why?"

"I have a request!"

"....."

I was about to question if that was the attitude of someone requesting something, but I felt it would've been too ordinary, so I stopped.

Zukin-chan approached me hurriedly.

"The knife! Give it to me, please!"

".....Eh?"

"You have it, don't you!? The knife!"

"Well, I have a few, but….."

Which one was she talking about?

Errr, I would guess……..

"Aah. Furuyari Zukin, the anti lock knife your grandfather forged? And, being its creator, you're asking me to return it under the name of

Furuyari Zukin?"

"Wrong! Don't play dumb!"

"……No, I'm not playing dumb."

"You're the one holding it, aren't you — *Unsigned*!"

"Unsigned……..?"

Mm……

I wasn't gonna understand it if you abruptly brought out such peculiar names.

"Master, master." Hikari-san pulled my sleeve. "Isn't it about that? The one you received from Aikawa-san, the small knife."

"Right, that!"

Even though she probably didn't know, Zukin-chan screamed.

She really was a loud girl.

"If I remember correctly……. I heard about it from Aikawa-san." In a composed manner, like she was used to this, Hikari-san ignored Zukin-chan and explained it to me. "That small knife……. I think it was named that. At that time, I was shown the original one, so there should be no mistake."

"Huh…… I didn't know the name. Though I heard it had a name like a woman in BlackJack."

"I'm saying that's it!"

Zukin-chan said.

Looking closely, she wore quite the serious expression.

To the point I was about to feel intimidated.

"Th-that — please!"

"Please, you say……. As you heard, it's something I received from someone, so I can't give it away that easily. You should understand that, at lea—"

"I'll do anything! I'll accept any condition! I have to return with *Unsigned*!"

".....First, please stop yelling so loudly. We'll talk after that, Zukin-chan."

I shouldn't take her lightly — I thought.

I could've done it if I tried, but I shouldn't have in this situation.

But even if we didn't enter combat, there were too many people,

so it wasn't a well-suited place for a serious conversation.

"Hikari-san. Is there anywhere nearby where we can talk?"

"I think master would be more knowledgeable about the surrounding area than me……."

"Yes, but since I live here, there are things I don't know. I want Hikari-san's opinion as a pro."

"Mm…… Then, there."

Where Hikari-san pointed, further towards the east, flowing under the Oike Great Bridge —

The Kamogawa river.

I don't think there's any need to elaborate on it.

A spot to the west, after going along the river for a bit.

By the way, during this time slot, the Kamogawa river is filled with couples.

So.

Hikari-san's idea.

Hikari-san at my left, Zukin-chan at my right.

Naming it the 'flower in both hands' formation.

"……."

"……."

"…….What happened? Ah, you're shy, aren't you?"

Hikari-san seemed to be having fun.

Even I was starting to have fun, just by looking at her.

About that, she can both seem to be and not be accustomed to the world, like she can seem to be exactly as her appearance of a middle schooler makes her to be, or like her actual age of twenty-seven makes her to be, anyway it felt like that.

But, well, certainly…… being mixed up among the couples of Kamogawa was a good idea……. but wasn't it somewhat of an ethical concern? I wondered if there were any policemen around……..

"Originally, you see."

Zukin-chan began to talk.

"It's because Grandpa would receive *Unsigned* that he joined the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"So mister fox promised it?"

"Yes. He said that."

"I see……."

The fact that I possessed the small knife, *Unsigned*, the fact that Aikawa-san handed it to me; I'm sure those were things you could learn with a bit of research…… But, again, what a lavishly empty promise.

"But grandpa died before receiving *Unsigned*……. Before he passed away, he said that was a big regret, so he…."

"He told you?"

"Yes."

Somehow,

Zukin-chan suddenly became docile.

Rather than docile, she became meek.

Maybe until just a moment ago, she'd been trying to forcibly raise the tension by being loud and making a clamor.

"That's why, please give it to me."

Even then.

Zukin-chan said clearly.

Without hesitating, she demanded it.

"At the very least, I want to put it... in front of his grave."

"……..So did Zukin-chan join the *Thirteen Stairs* for the same reason?"

"Exactly. Is that bad?"

"Not really."

It's unknown how serious the fox-masked man was. Even disregarding the situation with Magokoro, it seemed like he had no intention of introducing Zukin-chan to the other *Thirteen Stairs* in the first place…….

Either on a whim, for appearances' sake, or by eccentricity.

The alternative…… the alternative of the eleventh one.

"But when I saw you…… I thought it would be faster if I directly asked you……"

"Certainly, that might be right."

"Then, then!"

Zukin-chan lit up with joy.

She really did seem joyful.

But I shook my head.

"Hold on….. The story isn't finished yet. Also, you promised not to scream, Zukin-chan."

"……..Ah, right."

She nimbly looked the other way.

She seemed to be the kind of youngster that couldn't apologize.

Well, it was fine.

"I understand your reason…….. but I still haven't heard your grandpa's. Why did the eleventh Furuyari Zukin want that small knife — that *Unsigned*? To the point of obeying the fox-masked man."

"That's……" Zukin-chan spoke hesitantly. "Errr……. How should I say it, I guess it's fine….. It was originally grandpa's, after all — I guess."

"So like that anti lock blade, that small knife was one of your grandpa's creations?"

"Wrong — *Unsigned* isn't one of grandpa's creations, though."

"Though, you say……"

"……."

Zukin-chan stopped talking.

I struggled to deal with it.

From the sidelines, Hikari-san tried to help,"Is it something hard to say?", though I wasn't sure whether she said that to me or Zukin-chan.

The one who received that help was Zukin-chan.

"It's not really… something to say to other people."

"……..But."

"I understand, I understand, that you're just a third party and that you have no obligation even if I say something like this — 'if you want me to hand it over, shouldn't I at least hear the circumstances'?"

"…….Well, it feels like that."

"But if I told you the circumstances, I don't know if you'd still be willing to hand over *Unsigned*. I don't have any insurance. If you say you will hand me *Unsigned* no matter what, then I'll tell you."

"……..That condition isn't really fair. There's no balance. For me, for the current owner, hearing the story before making my decision

feels like a natural right."

"As I said, I understand that. But, but — for me, if I said that, I wouldn't have anything else I could do……."

She couldn't show her trump card that easily, huh.

Hmm.

What... should I do?

This was an unexpected case.

But, well, you could say it'd been convenient. I was able to directly meet one of the *Thirteen Stairs* without any planning, and I could furthermore enter in contact in a relatively peaceful way — it certainly wasn't a bad deal for me.

On top of that, from how her story went, it seemed that the advantage was on my side, the alternative. I didn't know what kind of person her grandpa was, but Furuyari Zukin, that girl herself was an exceedingly ordinary existence.

This situation, these conditions, if I manage to handle them well — I may be able to remove a step from *Thirteen Stairs* without any trouble. If her objective for entering *Thirteen Stairs* was that small knife, if I were to yield it, Zukin-chan would no longer have any reason to stay with them. Even if Zukin-chan left, it would probably deal no damage to the fox-masked man, but a step was still a step.

Naturally, I couldn't forget to consider that this whole story was totally false. I had to admit that she was one of the *Thirteen Stairs* but — this situation, these conditions, they could very well be a skillful lie set up by her and mister fox.

However, it was unclear what meaning a lie like that would have.

Even if he stole the small knife from me, the situation wouldn't change much. With my skill, no matter which famous sword or butterfly knife I used, the effect would be the same in the end.

And.

While Zukin-chan was looking silently but worriedly at my thinking face, right then — the phone in my pocket rang.

"Ah….. sorry."

It felt like I dodged her question, and the atmosphere suddenly got dampened, but still I took out my cell phone. Since I was in the

middle of an important conversation, I'd been thinking about turning it off.

However, I didn't do it.

What was displayed was Kouta-san's number.

Then, I had no choice but to answer.

I said "Hold on a minute.", stood up, brushed off the grass on my pants, and took some distance from Hikari-san and Zukin-chan. Hearing Zukin-chan's dissatisfied voice behind me, I answered.

"I am here to report, dear friend."

Kouta-san's report was extremely concise.

"It seems that the Zerozaki clan was annihilated."

ACT 15 - DEFENSELESS END

0

Making a decision with too little information is taking a leap. Like an explosive.

1

Fifteenth of October — Saturday.

The promised day with Emoto-san.

The meeting with the puppeteer, Migishita Rurero.

Meeting Emoto-san at the Imperial Garden.

I was almost ready to hear that I couldn't meet her again today because she was unstable, but according to Emoto-san,

"It's fine."

So it seemed.

"Somehow….. she's recovered enough to be able to talk…… she's recovered. Her heart is also calm for now. Of course, she still can't move……. but I decided it was okay, as a doctor. I-it's not a lie, it's the truth. I-I swear it's true……. She can sufficiently……. su-sufficiently talk."

"Is that so — then."

Then there was another problem to take care of.

The present problem.

An extremely pragmatic problem.

How to get to where Rurero-san was accommodated, Assistant

Professor Kigamine's laboratory, the former Saitou Clinic; the means of transport to get there.

In this case, the vespa and the Fiat would be a bad choice.

Both stood out too much.

It would have been fine if standing out didn't bother me, but I wanted to be as discreet as possible when going to talk to Rurero-san, and I was sure that the vespa and Fiat I regularly used were known. Especially the vespa, since he saw me riding it. Even disregarding standing out or not, there was the license plate……..

Hearing that, Emoto-san said, "Y-you….. you could simply go, in my car's passenger seat….. couldn't you?"

Thinking about it, Emoto-san had been taking care of Rurero-san, so that meant she must have used a car when moving from outside the city to the Imperial Garden. I had completely overlooked the idea of her car.

Somehow….. Emoto-san and cars were like oil and water; the image didn't fit. I vaguely thought that she might have been going by taxi…….. but it appeared she had been driving herself.

Hmm.

"That would mean you would have to accompany me back as well….."

"It's fine. I don't mind."

"Then……"

I guess I would rely on her.

And so, I was guided to where Emoto-san had illegally parked, near the Imperial Garden.

It was a white Mercedes Benz.

Naturally, an S class.

"....."

"What's wrong……? Hurry, get in. Rurero-san…… I-I'm still a bit worried about her."

"I…… yes." I boarded in the passenger seat. "Um…… Err, this is an unrelated question, but this, is this your own car?"

"Yeah……. It is?"

"....."

I guess back-alley doctors earned a lot.

Black Jack.

No, culture shock.

"Mm……The air conditioning may be a bit much. It's cold."

"…….Right."

Emoto-san's driving skill, which I'd been worried about, was, although not particularly good, not overwhelmingly miserable. It was still tolerable; she passed. It would've probably been too cruel to compare it to Hikari-san's driving without a license, but once we left the city, the rest would only be mountain paths, so it should be fine.

"Aah….. Emoto-san."

"Wh….. wh-what could it be? Di-did I do something bad? E-errr, the wipers aren't moving…… The gear is correct….."

"No……"

I guess that didn't change her unstable mentality.

It might've been for the best to not talk to her.

But I would at least tell her about that.

"Um, on Wednesday — I met Zukin-chan."

"Huh…….. Eh? Zukin-**chan**?"

"Ah, errr……"

Right, she didn't know.

I briefly explained the relation between the eleventh and the twelfth Furuyari Zukin blacksmiths to Emoto-san. That the eleventh Furuyari Zukin passed away earlier that month, that Zukin-chan inherited his name and that, at the same time, Zukin-chan substituted for him as the fifth step of the *Thirteen Stairs*. And — even about her objective as well.

Emoto-san said "Huuh." in a very impressed manner.

"I didn't…… know about this at all."

"Emoto-san, have you ever met the eleventh Furuyari Zukin?"

"I have…… He was a vigorous old man."

"Is that your observation as a doctor?"

"No…… It's not like I examined him. Just an impression. I'm not Sherlock Holmes, I can't figure everything out at first glance. For anything aside from surgery, I wouldn't know the details without

palpating him. So I can't say anything preemptive."

"Is that so. If I remember correctly, she said he was ninety-eight. It might've just been his lifespan running out."

"Yes…….. Fitting for his age. His body had grown weaker after all. He sometimes coughed, so I asked 'Should I examine you?', but….. he refused. I…… I'm sure, he h-hated me…… Uh-ughhh."

"Please don't cry while driving……."

Well, it seemed he really hated doctors.

I probably shouldn't mention that.

"But…….. Um, mister fox also, does incomprehensible things. That girl…… Was she really a high schooler?"

"Yes. She had a student ID. However, it seems she barely ever commutes to school." Even the day we met was a weekday. "She's a grandpa's kid. Ever since she was conscious, she's always been taking care of the eleventh — it seems. How should I say, like nursing."

"Nursing for the elderly…… it's not easy. Zukin-san seemed lively…… but even then, he couldn't…… have normal kids."

"Maybe."

On that point, I'd certainly underestimated her.

Zukin-chan.

Yes, I'd admit it.

"But — um, she doesn't seem to have much skill in blacksmithing. Even if it's not zero, she said herself that she was still in training."

".....Is that so."

"According to her, it seems she has the talent, but — to become great, she would need twenty or thirty more years. Though that's impressive in itself, she has no power at the moment. I judged her to be a very ordinary high school girl."

"Really….. I don't get it. Mister fox…… why would you involve…… a girl like that? It's not typical of mister fox…… or, rather. If he were to involve her as an enemy….. then okay….. Let's say it's okay. But involving her as an ally — it's weird."

"Even though he was keeping it a secret from the other *Thirteen Stairs*, I still think it was just to make up numbers, just to fill in the missing steps. Just one of his usual whims. There was probably no

special meaning to it."

"....."

"Perhaps he was moved — she seemed desperate. She even said she'd do anything to retrieve *Unsigned*. Ordinarily, making a *request* to me, her supposed enemy, is something that shouldn't have been done. Even if I don't understand that part, that earnestness — was not common."

"But….. mister fox, is not someone who would be moved by that. He's not, kind like you, nor a good…… person, I think."

"I'm not kind either, nor a good person — have you heard anything? About why the eleventh Furuyari Zukin wanted back *Unsigned*."

"It's my first time hearing that he'd wanted it back….. Hmm. I wondered why Zukin-chan would join *Thirteen Stairs*…… but she had a proper objective."

"An objective…… Can we really call it that? For you, it was 'healing the injured', right? For Izumu-kun — I guess it was because Rizumu-chan had idolized mister fox. Kino-san was interested in mister fox, too…… For Nureginu-san, it was their master's order…… By the way, do you know anything about Nureginu-san's master?"

"Not really…… I think they must be an acquaintance of mister fox, but that's just an assumption."

"Is that so. Well, it doesn't matter now…… For the Miotsukushi Sisters, judging from their actions, they must idolize mister fox like Rizumu-chan. According to Izumu-kun, it's the same for Ichirizuka Konomi, and Nureginu-san said that Rurero-san is like that too…… Though he said it himself, he really is popular with girls……."

It was like a harem, the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Though I had no intention of meddling with anyone's tastes.

"That reminds me, even though you're a woman, you don't have anything like that, do you? Idolization or intoxication for mister fox."

"....."

Emoto-san went silent.

I guess what I'd said was too harsh for someone who couldn't make any friends.

I returned to the main topic.

"In Magokoro's case, we can't really say she's officially part of the *Thirteen Stairs*. Since mister fox said it was twelve, plus one, people. If I had to guess, it would have been — **to meet me**. Then, the only ones left — "

Errr, how many had I said again?

There were too many to remember.

"Ah, Utage Kudan, Noise-kun, and Tokinomiya Jikoku."

"Right."

"Well, for an old member like Utage Kudan, I can somehow understand it….. but for Noise-kun and Tokinomiya Jikoku, I have no idea at all. Like Zukin-chan -- no, Zukin-san, they might have a concrete objective."

"I don't know. That might be a problem for when you talk to them eventually…… but, the current issue is Rurero-san, isn't it?"

"……..Right."

"I shouldn't be saying it at this point, but……. even if it's not as bad as with Konomi-chan, it will be pretty hard to make her betray mister fox."

"Yes…… I was told the same thing by Nureginu-san."

"If it's you — you might be able to manage something, though."

"Why is that?"

"Because you're mister fox's enemy."

Emoto-san said that, and then closed her mouth.

I didn't understand the true meaning behind her words —

but for some reason, I refrained from asking about it.

It was that kind of atmosphere.

I went silent too.

……By the way — Zukin-chan.

I'd exchanged a promise with Furuyari Zukin the twelfth.

If I were to exaggerate, it was a ceasefire treaty.

Or maybe a non-aggression pact.

Unsigned.

In the end, I'd decided to hand it over to Zukin-chan. I still didn't understand her objective, but the blade known as *Unsigned* wasn't that

important of a weapon to me.

I'd thought that the people who wanted it should take it.

To cite mister fox, a great weapon chooses its owner — right. Then, no matter how you think about it, I was not the one fit for *Unsigned*.

I didn't need a knife.

If you'd allow me to say something pretentious, having one in your heart was good enough.

However — naturally, it wasn't for nothing. As a concerned party, I couldn't trust her without being cautious.

Therefore, a credit transaction.

If, until the end of the month, **Zukin-chan doesn't set anything up against me** — at that time, with the absolute condition of hearing the eleventh's reason, I'd promised to hand *Unsigned* over to her. It didn't matter if that reason was something I would be satisfied with or not. Leaving the *Thirteen Stairs* was, of course, a given. Regarding that, Zukin-chan said that she'd joined the *Thirteen Stairs* for that reason in the first place, so she had no complaints, but it seems she hadn't understood the reason why I chose until the end of the month.

'If those are the conditions, I'll talk now, so hand it over immediately' — she demanded *Unsigned* with a hastiness typical of a youngster. However, the end of the month was itself a compromise.

Normally, I'd have said 'when everything was over'. When everything was over, at that time, if Zukin-chan had not shown any animosity towards me — that was the ideal condition.

But I couldn't ask that.

Because, to retrieve *Unsigned*, relying on the fox-masked man didn't bother Zukin-chan. She essentially just wanted to get her hands on *Unsigned*, without concern for ethics or attachments. Relying on the fox-masked man or me probably didn't make much of a difference.

Thus, I had to make a compromise.

A compromise.

That was, the end of the month.

Since Magokoro had come over to my side, the situation had changed — but, judging from what he'd said at Sumiyuri Academy,

the fox-masked man probably intended to use last month's calm as an opening act, and then settle things for good this month.

In September, people don't die.

In October, people die.

He liked September,

and hated October.

That's what he'd said.

If I were to believe those words, the convergence point was this month.

Since October was an Achilles' heel,

he'd chosen October as the time of the battle.

Then,

at the very least, I would have Zukin-chan stay quiet the entire month. I decided that would be good enough. Even if that was some kind of trap, as long as I could seal her movements for a period of time, paying something in return wasn't unreasonable. Though — that was only if she was the kind of cunning person who could set up traps.

Anyhow, as of today, half a month had passed.

I had to somehow hold on for the other half.

I was rather preoccupied and worried about it, but **since my insurance didn't work anymore**, I had to choose that way.

"....."

Insurance, huh…..

On my side, too — after that phone call from Kouta-san, my plans had gone awry. Although I didn't have very high expectations from the start……

Attack, defense, insurance.

Setting the defense aside — the attack.

Well, if Zukin-chan kept her promise with me — since she didn't have any connection with the other steps, after leaving the *Thirteen Stairs*, it was natural for her to think she would be better off quietly returning home, as opposed to cooperating with me. Then, how would I act from now on….. For Magokoro's sake, I wanted to meet Tokinomiya Jikoku as soon as possible…..

No, it was unnecessary.

At the moment, that was unnecessary.

Don't think about anything unnecessary.

Now, I needed to focus — focus on Migishita Rurero.

The Puppeteer, Migishita Rurero.

Of course, it wouldn't go like with Emoto-san or Zukin-chan. Someone captivated by the charm, the charisma of mister fox,

someone with supernatural powers.

But I had to do it.

On the other hand, since she had a severe wound, she couldn't do anything to us — by having her, who was capable only of talking, as my first opponent, I would have some training for my eventual confrontation with Ichirizuka Konomi and the Miotsukushi Sisters. Since this was a performance I didn't have any control over, I don't know if training is the right word for it — but, at the very least, facing Rurero-san should have been a lot easier than Ichirizuka Konomi or the Miotsukushi Sisters.

Well, even if I couldn't make her an ally, at the very least, I needed to have the chains cast on Magokoro be released.

Only that.

".....How is Magokoro-chan doing?"

Emoto-san abruptly asked.

She was probably curious.

As a doctor.

"As usual — she's constantly waking up and falling back asleep. As long as she's calm, she can manage to stay awake for three hours a day."

"I see……"

"After examining her for the last few days, the problem seems to be the density of her consciousness."

"Density?"

"Yes. Well, I don't really want to say a bunch of random stuff in front of a doctor, but in short — think of when her mind is strained as *high density*, and *low density* for when her mind is calm. For example, when she is angry or acts violently, her mind becomes agitated, and that proportionally reduces her active time. On the contrary, if she

just sips tea on the veranda, she's able to function for a longer time."

"Heeh……"

"You could say that there's a total amount of *consciousness* that she can use every day. Tokinomiya Jikoku's Thought Manipulation — I heard from Aikawa-san that the *Tokinomiya* used *fear*…… and it really does seem to be that. I don't know what kind of dreams she sees, but when she's asleep, Magokoro is awfully peaceful."

"……..So those are the chains you want to remove the most."

"Yes. I don't know to what extent Rurero-san's *puppeteer* power affects Magokoro, but — she's restraining her *physical body*, isn't she? Can I just understand that as restraining her movements?"

"I guess it's something like that….. Ask Rurero-san directly for details. **A power capable of turning people into puppets** — that's what I heard…… but I don't know any more."

"The name *Migishita* isn't in the *Killing Names* or *Cursing Names*, is it? Or maybe, like the *Miotsukushi*, it's some family's branch?"

"Who knows….. I don't think so."

Not someone who controlled puppets,

But someone who turned humans into puppets, huh.

Not a puppet user, but a puppeteer.

That was quite complex.

"……..Umm, Ikkun. I-I know i-it's unnecessary and irritating, but…… Um, just in case, I should w-warn, or advise you….."

"I'm listening."

"Y-yes. You know, Rurero-san….. with this wound, I don't think she can do anything — but even though she shouldn't be able to do anything, regardless of that, thinking of that one-in-a-million chance, you should be prepared, I think."

"…….What do you mean?"

"**Be careful… to not become a puppet**."

Hearing Emoto-san's words, I nodded.

Puppet.

A puppet with no heart.

That was… cruel.

Those words squeezed my heart.

"...I'm not a puppet."

So that Emoto-san couldn't hear it,
I mumbled that, in a voice only I could hear.

2

Assistant Professor Kigamine's research facility — I should probably talk about it in past tense, but since her death hadn't been made public, it was still officially correct. On the second floor, in the room closest to the stairs, Rurero-san had been put to sleep.

Some kind of machinery that clearly must have been brought from the outside filled the room, and Rurero-san's body was connected to it in various places. I guess the technology already present in this facility was not enough to treat Rurero-san, or maybe it was just Emoto-san's obsession.

Either way was fine though.

Inside the room — well, it seems it had originally originally been used as a hospital room, so you could say it'd retrieved its former function — there was only me and Rurero-san, who sat atop the bed.

Emoto-san wasn't present.

I would've been grateful if she was here as a doctor, and she wasn't against that idea either, but if she were present — naturally, Migishita Rurero would've realized that Emoto Sonoki was a traitor.

That would have been really bad.

It would have been bad.

That's why we made it seem as if Emoto-san was absent and I snuck inside the building on my own; we acted under that somewhat clumsy pretense. I had Emoto-san drop me off at an appropriate place with her Benz, then walked up to the research facility on foot. As for the door that had been locked by Emoto-san when she left, naturally, as was customary, I took out the anti lock knife and opened it.

One hour — was what she said.

More than an hour of conversation was forbidden.

In one hour, Emoto-san would come.

I had until then.

However…..

Migishita Rurero — The Puppeteer.

"What's up……. I swear, good grief. So it's you — *Ii-chan*."

She —

as if she'd predicted my arrival beforehand, she eyed me and said that.

Since Rurero-san was tied with bandages, casts, corset, IVs, and other medical tools set up besides the bed, she couldn't move a muscle, not even her neck, so I had to enter her field of vision myself.

Even that field of vision — was cut in half.

The right eye.

"Sorry for this appearance. I'm in this pitiable state where I even have to make someone else take care of me down there, *Ii-chan*. For a cute young man like you, it should make for a pretty miserable sight — it's not something to look at."

"That's not true." Saying that, I moved to the center of Rurero-san's field of vision and rested my back against the wall. "I don't dislike seeing an injured woman. It's beautiful — that's what I think."

"Hooh. You talk big."

Rurero-san spoke casually.

With a strength that made you question if she really was severely injured.

"Even ignoring that, I pretty much never cease to get injuries. With you, at least, I feel a certain affinity."

"Selfish pity isn't very pleasant. If you have any business here, could you just hurry up and get on with it?"

In an easy going way

Rurero-san said that.

"Normally, I can't be sure, but I currently cannot use my arms or legs, so killing me would probably be easier than twisting a baby's hand — no, I could probably be killed even by that baby's hand. If you want to kill me, hurry up and do it. Or maybe you like torture? You don't seem like the type, but it doesn't really bother me. Do as you see

fit."

"……I want to hear from you."

Making sure to not get overwhelmed by Rurero-san, I brought those words out of my mouth. As expected of one of the *Thirteen Stairs*; even in this situation, she could pressure me with her words alone.

The atmosphere made me want to run away.

In front of the rash Rurero-san, I felt the rise in difficulty compared to dealing with an ordinary and nonchalant high school girl.

But,

certainly, **normally, I couldn't be sure**.

But if it was just a contest of words —

I would make that contest itself invalid.

I would nullify it.

"Your story. I want to hear it."

"…….Hah. What? I was wondering what this was about, but an invitation for betrayal, huh? How foolish. Go away."

"……"

There was no bird to get — huh.

Though it was as expected.

"Whether you — " I said. "Whether you choose to betray or not isn't for me to decide. However, what kind of conversation I have with you and whether I leave this place or not; that's my decision. You have no right to decide for me."

"Then you should just say what you want quickly." Rurero-san answered curtly. "Because, after all, I have no means to shut you up — but don't misunderstand. I may be an unknown rogue, but I at least know your logic."

"That's some impressive loyalty. I'm envious. In my nineteen years of life, I've had little to no connection with loyalty — no, but I'm sure it must feel good. To be able to trust someone unconditionally and unintentionally."

"……"

"Relying on someone must feel good, I imagine. It's just — a one-

sided trust is heavy."

".....What are you trying to say? Being so suggestive."

"No, I'm just talking about my experience. Thought it might make us feel more familiar. I just wanted to say it, there was no deeper meaning to it. Neither of us can talk for long, so let's quickly dive into the main topic, shall we? Before that, aren't you thirsty? Don't you want to hydrate yourself with that feeding cup? If you want, I can — "

"Stop there. As you can see, my mouth still moves — I can at least bite you."

"Is that so. Then, do as you want."

She didn't say that lightheartedly.

I could feel an enormous amount of animosity coming my way. If I were to carelessly get close, there's no telling which part of my body would be bitten off.

"First, I want you to tell me about your power as a Puppeteer — the truth about it. I've deciphered it to some extent, but the whole thing is still vague."

"Magokoro — "

"....."

"Magokoro-chan. She's at your place, isn't she?" Rurero-san took the initiative and asked, ignoring my question. "Forcibly breaking out of our chains, the only destination she would go to is your house — "

"......Well, for now, let's say you're right." I accepted Rurero-san's words. "Yes. At the moment, I already know that Magokoro is under the constraints of Kino-san, Tokinomiya Jikoku, and you. And — I myself want to break her free of those chains. I won't ask you to betray, but how about it? Couldn't you cooperate with me on that?"

After having the initiative stolen, I struck back.

Cutting deep.

As if unexpected, I exposed myself.

".....Hah."

Faced with my all too straightforward request, Rurero-san became speechless for a moment and then laughed through her nose.

"Certainly, it's not like I don't get where you're coming from. Chains can restrain people — however, you shouldn't forget that they

can also protect them. If tigers from a zoo broke free from their cages and went into town, what would happen? Of course, they would get shot down."

"……That's just sophistry."

"It doesn't only apply to our world. For example, in normal society, if the *chain* known as *the law* didn't exist, peace wouldn't be possible, would it? What's important is common sense — "

"Common sense? Those words don't fit you."

"**Don't talk as if you know anything, kid** — no, in this case, **as expected of mister fox's enemy** would be the better answer."

"You — what did you do to Magokoro?"

That day.

What I couldn't hear at Sumiyuri Academy —

what I'd wanted to hear but couldn't ask,

I asked Rurero-san.

"How trivial."

Rurero-san said.

"Don't talk to people like they're witches or monsters, *Ii-chan*. Our actions are only irrational compared to rigorous common sense — isn't that girl the true monster?"

"……I won't... deny that."

It was on an entirely different level from Professor Kyouichirou calling Kunagisa a monster. The Magokoro I saw in that gymnasium truly was deserving of that description.

It was on the same level as Kunagisa calling Aikawa-san a human.

Though it was a shame.

But,

that wasn't Magokoro's responsibility.

"But since your name is aligned with the *Cursing Names' Tokinomiya* and *Kino*, you aren't much different."

"Please don't say that. Even I don't want to work with *Cursing Names*. ……..Well, if I had to say, my methods are closer to Jikoku's *techniques*, rather than Raichi's *poison*… Hey. Hey, hey, Ii-chan."

"What is it?"

"You know, I only trained Magokoro-chan and I ended up like this.

And that wasn't even her full power. And in the first place, didn't you see that girl beat down Humanity's Strongest in one blow?"

"....."

"Even then, wanting to release her chains is just selfishness on your part, if you ask me. Sacrificing ninety-nine sheeps for the sake of one isn't always right. Even if it's beautiful — it's not right."

"Truthfully….. that's right. But — I can't look at it. The sight of her being restrained by other people's chains — I don't want to see it anymore. Because, ever since back then, she's always been like that. Because of that, she even died once. It should be fine to release that Magokoro now, shouldn't it? She should be able to flee from the spell known as The Orange Seed that was cast over her. Any more, and — "

I said.

"Neither you nor mister fox… You don't have the right to do as you please with Magokoro."

"Mister fox — thinking about it, he's like her true father. Though the man himself said that she was his *granddaughter* — "

"Even for parents or grandparents, there are things you can and cannot do. No matter how you think about it, it's not right."

"Those aren't words fit for Humanity's Worst." Rurero-san smiled faintly. "For example…… Or rather, hypothetically, if the stars aligned….. *Ii-chan*. If mine, Jikoku's, and Raichi's, if our restraints were gone — could you control Magokoro?"

"I've thought about it a lot. But, setting aside whether I could control her or not, setting aside whether I could function as a scabbard for Magokoro in the state she's in now — even then, you controlling The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro; no matter how you look at it, it can't be right. If it's you guys controlling her, then I'd prefer it if no one controlled her."

".....Regardless of your personality, you're a righteous man."

"It's not like that….. I'm just saying the natural truth, which is that the one controlling Magokoro should not be you or me, but Magokoro herself."

"How idealistic. Too strong a power will invite disaster; that's an obvious fact and you know it."

I changed the subject.

It was time to change the subject.

The topic of Magokoro would come up again at the end.

"Rurero-san, what kind of past led you to join the *Thirteen Stairs*?"

"....."

Rurero-san closed her mouth and showed no intention to answer the question.

Not minding it, I continued.

"To be honest, it's not something I have much interest in. Whatever it is, it doesn't really matter. I just want to know if you wish for the end of the world, the end of the Story."

"It's the same as life — "

Rurero-san said.

" —Rather than living a long and lazy life, isn't it fine to prefer blowing up like fireworks?"

"For the people you dragged into those fireworks, it's nothing to laugh at." I said. "You shouldn't point your fireworks towards people — it's written on the warning text, isn't it? Even kids know that. You say you work behind the scenes, that the only thing you did was train Magokoro, but that's wrong. The fact that people I hold dear around me got hurt is — **all your fault**."

"....."

"Asano Miiko, Yamiguchi Houko, Ishinagi Moeta, Niounomiya Izumu and Rizumu, Aikawa Jun — Omokage Magokoro, and me. Oops, I shouldn't forget about Maki-san either. All of them were deeply, deeply hurt because of you. Some were left with incurable wounds, and some will never come back."

".....Unfortunately, I don't have a strong enough conscience to be moved by such cliché words. Not now. Maybe this kind of childish admonition would have had an effect ten years ago — "

But I'm already an adult.

Migishita Rurero said that.

"I know I'm the assaillant. Just living is enough to hurt other people. If so, I at least want it to be for someone's sake — I want to hurt for someone's sake."

".....For an adult, that's a very selfish opinion."

"It's the same for everyone — even yourself. Hurting people for the sake of people, being hurt by people for the sake of people; constantly, no matter the era, hurting and being hurt. It all amounts to the same. Even if there are some inconsistencies, it's just plus-minus-zero in the end. That's how the world is made — "

Back Nozzle.

Jail Alternative.

This world's laws.

"The world's been zero from the start."

"....."

"Then it's fine if it ends, isn't it?"

Hmm……

There had been some miscalculation.

Miscalculations.

So Rurero-san wasn't simply idolizing the fox-masked man…….. Of course, idolizing him was an aftereffect, but it was not the premise. It seemed that she agreed with the fox-masked man on a fair deal of the groundwork. That meant — I needed to alter my plan of attack slightly.

"I am alone."

Rurero-san said.

As expected, in a nonchalant way.

"Unlike *Tokinomiya* and *Kino*, I'm not part of a clique. I'm totally different from those *Killing Names* or *Cursing Names*; since the moment I was born, I've been alone. I was born from the crotch of wood, chewing rocks and drinking mud."

".....Rurero-san."

"The title of Puppeteer was something I acquired to live. Using and hurting people, that's how I've lived. Not for anyone else, for my sake. Just for my sake.… Can you understand how sad a life that was?"

Rurero-san was,

glaring at me with her left eye alone.

"I heard what kind of life you led from mister fox, so I know. That must have been hard. The Kunagisa Syndicate and the ER3 System.

Kunagisa Tomo and Omokage Magokoro. Must have been hard… But even then — you must have moved for someone else. You must have been able to live for someone else's sake, weren't you?"

"....."

"You may have been effectively unfamiliar with loyalty, but even then, there must have still been humans around you. Around me, there have only ever been... enemies."

" —Enemies."

"Facing me — were only enemies."

Just enemies. Only enemies.

I could understand.

How sad that life had been,

I felt like I could understand it.

Rurero-san would have probably denied it, but —

certainly, around me,

there were humans.

Even then, I could understand what she felt.

That was why I could understand.

"I didn't know whether I was alive or dead — that balance, there was always a firm and uncollapsible equilibrium. But — mister fox collapsed that equilibrium. Easily and simply."

"So even if you only joined the *Thirteen Stairs* recently, it seems you've known mister fox for a long time."

"Exactly."

"I see."

"I want to exist solely for mister fox's sake. That man gave a rogue like me a reason to live. For his sake — I don't care who I hurt."

"……Even yourself?"

"Even myself."

She answered clearly.

Even with that serious injury,

she answered like so.

Without wavering.

Without budging.

"Rurero-san……. from your perspective, what kind of person is

mister fox?"

"As I said — the Worst." Said Rurero-san. "There aren't many people that egotistic and optimistic. Furthermore, if they possess an personality fitting for that — "

"I heard you can turn people into puppets. Couldn't you turn mister fox into one, then?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't do that kind of thing. Him being alive is beautiful. It wouldn't make sense to stuff a wild animal."

"....."

"Rather... **I feel like I shouldn't** do that kind of thing. No, not really….. it's not even that. Whether I do it or not, it probably wouldn't make a difference."

"Well……. I get what you want to say. But — I'm scared of that man."

"Scared, huh."

"Yes. Scared — really scared. You — you guys, aren't you scared of mister fox? It's like he holds the world in the palm of his hand. He said that he was modestly being washed away by destiny, but I can only see it as him making destiny his toy. That's why... I'm scared. Does that seem off from your perspective?"

"........At the very least, I'm not afraid of mister fox at all. I feel safe being at his side."

"Safe — "

Pretty much the opposite of being scared.

Rurero-san continued with "that being said".

"There might be someone who's scared of mister fox among the *Thirteen Stairs* — "

"Who?"

"Utage Kudan."

Rurero-san said an unexpected name.

Since I thought it would have been Noise-kun, or at least Emoto-san, that was completely unexpected.

"Since that *Tokinomiya* who rules over fear, Jikoku, said so, it's probably safe to bet on it — Utage is fairly scared of mister fox."

"Utage... Kudan."

That reminds me,

Izumu-kun said.

That Utage Kudan **resembled me**.

Was that what he'd meant?

Still sticking with them, despite betraying the *Thirteen Stairs* repeatedly; someone shrouded in mystery who had yet to appear before me. However, what Rurero-san said differed from my image of Utage Kudan.

"That person, **because she's scared of him**, she either sticks to mister fox or distances herself from him, so I've heard. Though I personally can't see him like that. But, well….. it's not like I can't understand how someone would feel that way. It's what's called the curiosity of fear."

"Curiosity… of fear."

"Wanting to see something you don't understand and fear through to the end, so that you can confirm it wasn't really that scary — something like that. But in this case, **it turned out to really be scary**. There's no telling what might happen."

"So those betrayals were just ways to confirm it?"

"Jikoku talked about Utage as a *coward* — even when he said it directly to her face, she just made an unpleasant face….. If you're talking about being scared, I'm much more scared of Utage."

"Is that so?"

"Utage Kudan. Going back to the beginning, she was also a candidate to be mister fox's *enemy*... Hah. In that sense, frankly, I also find you scary. It's not like I don't think anything of you. Therefore, I understand very well why mister fox chose you as his *enemy*. With my body — I can understand it."

"If you're scared, could you stop being so malicious? I normally hate conflict. That includes violence, of course, but also verbal confrontations. I don't like them. I want to live my life without bumping into others. I'm a coward at my core."

"My loyalty towards mister fox outweighs my fear towards you."

"I guess." I nodded. "Anyway, setting me aside, first — "

And.

As I was trying to return the topic towards Magokoro —

the instant I thought about bringing the conversation back to the chains restricting Magokoro, it somehow entered my line of sight. On the other side of the window...

I shuddered.

"Eh……?"

Without thinking, my voice leaked.

Outside of the window, from this angle, I could see the parking lot.

In that parking lot,

a car was being parked.

I remembered that car.

A two-seater white Porsche.

And, in the driver's seat.

The one steering the wheels was —

"……Saitou Takashi."

The fox-masked man.

Impossible…… Why was he here?

In an instant, I was suddenly thrown into confusion.

"……? What happened?"

From Rurero-san's position, from her posture, she couldn't see it, so she was puzzled over my expression and why I suddenly stopped talking. However, I couldn't comment on that.

Why……..?

That was bad — wasn't it?

It was bad….. no matter how you thought about it. I shouldn't have encountered the fox-masked man now. I had still only confronted three of the *Thirteen Stairs,* Rurero-san included. I couldn't meet the fox-masked man at this half-assed point.

Emoto-san was — not here.

From what I could see from the window, Emoto-san's white Benz was nowhere to be seen.

So she hadn't been found out.

Then was it just a coincidence?

A coincidence that he'd come here at this time?

Like he'd been aiming for it?

Like he'd planned for it?

Like he'd set it up?

……..Like destiny.

Like… the Story.

"……!"

In August too, I'd *encountered* the fox-masked man in this facility — but at that time, he'd only had a moderate amount of interest towards me. He didn't consider me his enemy yet.

No,

it was here that he'd chosen me as his enemy.

Then moreover, that meant.

I could not meet that man here.

Not here and now.

Not yet.

However, that being said….. What would I do?

The only entrance was the front door.

Even if there was a backdoor — given the architecture of the building, there was no way there wasn't one, but I didn't know where it could've been — while I searched for it, the fox-masked man would've entered the building.

Outside the window.

Having finished parking his car, the fox-masked man got out of his Porsche.

A fox mask, kimono and getas.

A refreshing and slender silhouette.

There was no sign of anyone being in the passenger seat.

He was alone.

He came here alone.

Just like that, without making any detour, the fox-masked walked straight towards the entrance. It was no good, I wouldn't get there in time.

I could no longer escape from the building.

I couldn't really jump from the window either….. What should I have done? Should I have hid somewhere like in the shower room?

…….I couldn't.

It was a foolish idea. Even if I hid temporarily like that, Rurero-san was here, wasn't she? There was no way the fox-masked man knew I was here — thinking under that assumption, it made sense to think that the fox-masked man came here because I met Rurero-san, or rather, because I had the objective to meet her. It might also have been Emoto-san….. Then, no matter what, if I hid in the shower room, I probably wouldn't be found by the fox-masked man — but if Rurero-san exposed me, there wouldn't be any point. Even if I jumped out the window, nothing would change.

If it was just my problem, it would've been fine.

But...

If I wasn't careful, it could've spelled trouble for Emoto-san too.

That, I needed to avoid.

"....."

I ignored Rurero-san's questioning look and searched through my bag on the floor. The bag still held the various things that I took to Sumiyuri Academy that day, in addition to the anti-lock blade. Even though the situation was different, that was the most basic precaution I could've taken. Of course, I was also wearing *Unsigned* in the holster under my jacket.

I didn't forget to bring my Jericho either.

I showed that fact to Rurero-san.

".....What? So in the end, you're finishing this with violence?" Rurero-san said with contempt. "It's fine, be my guest. But if you kill my body, that just means you weren't able to kill my spirit."

Even if my body yields, my mind won't.

Rurero-san bragged.

".....Please don't misunderstand. You're completely off the mark. I had no intention of bringing these in the first place. Even now, I don't want to use them. That's why — I want to ask for a favor."

"What? What are you sayi— "

"Please don't talk about me. You can talk about anything else."

Saying that, I nimbly, without hesitation, crawled under the bed Rurero-san lied on.

In that space, where a human could barely fit, it was cramped and hard to breathe. Since I was clinging to the floor, I could hear the sounds of the entire building.

Creak, creak.

Someone was walking.

Of course, it was the fox-masked man.

The sound of climbing the stairs.

The sound of getting closer to this room.

As expected, Rurero-san had noticed.

".....You."

"I'm aiming at you from below, but please don't make me shoot. Please, just don't talk about me."

"....."

There was no answer.

I couldn't see her eyes from where I was.

I was worried.

If it was just to get over this situation,

then this is definitely the way to go.

Just in case, I tried to warn Rurero-san once more.

But I couldn't make it in time.

The door — it opened.

Creak.

Creak — the floor creaked.

It made a sound.

"Yo — Rurero."

The first one to speak —

was the fox-masked man.

I could glean that Rurero-san gulped.

It transmitted to me.

I naturally calmed my breathing.

Calm down — there's no way he'd notice me.

Setting his existence and personality aside, he had no combat skills. Aikawa-san said it, hadn't she — there was no way he'd find a human hiding in such an unexpected place.

Even if I tried to tell myself that,

my heartbeat wouldn't stop accelerating.

No matter how much I calmed my breathing,

the sound of my beating heart might have reached him.

".....Hello. Mister fox—"

Rurero-san answered tensely.

Even in that gymnasium, Rurero-san seemed to act informally towards the fox-masked man. Thinking about it, it was my first time hearing Rurero-san and the fox-masked man talking alone. No, not just Rurero-san. Until now — I hadn't known how the fox-masked man interacted with any of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Under the bed.

From under the bed, I could only see the fox-masked man's legs. Only his kimono's trousers and his feet. But even then, I couldn't mistake him for anyone else. The fact that this was the fox-masked man — I could affirm it with my intuition.

"Hm. Though I thought I would never come here again — well, I have no choice. Ever since Kuchiha left this world, the time that had stagnated started ticking again, the predetermined harmony crumbled — no, I guess it doesn't matter now. How are you feeling, Rurero?"

".....As you can see."

Rurero-san answered the fox-masked man.

"I'm showing off my pitiful appearance."

"What about it is pitiful? Didn't you obtain those wounds for my sake? If that isn't beautiful then what is? Your current appearance is extremely sublime."

".....You sure talk big."

Rurero-san — for now, it didn't seem like she would talk about me, so I calmed down.

Rurero-san…..

"Rurero, be proud of yourself. Didn't you achieve your objective? You don't have anything to be ashamed of. The more hurt you get for my sake, the more beautiful you will become."

.....Umm.

Even though he was essentially saying the same thing as me, it somehow sounded much better from him. Is it just a matter of life

experience, or maybe something inherent, I didn't know.

"I figured your wounds would have healed enough to be able to talk — though I didn't hear from Sonoki, it was my own guess. That reminds me, Sonoki isn't here. Did she go somewhere?"

"Yes — she said she had some personal business."

"'Said she had some personal business'. Hm. I don't intend to meddle with her private life, but I would be lying if I said I had no interest. I see, I see — the entrance was left open. For the terribly nervous Emoto, that sure is unexpected. Even though there's an injured person here, how careless."

"Right, exactly. While I can't move an inch myself— "

"Well, it's normal for that Doctor. Even if I worry or not, it's the same."

"You're just like usual — **even though something like that happened**."

"The incident with Magokoro, huh……. Hm."

The fox-masked man stopped talking.

It seemed he was thinking about something.

"It's been five days since then, huh…….. You probably don't realize it because you were asleep, but it was quite the mess for our side. I shall explain the current situation to you."

"No…… It's fine, you don't need to explain that kind of thing." Rurero-san spoke, clearly being careful of me. "I'm not worried. Since it's you, you probably played it skilfully and dealt with the situation — just from knowing that you had the leeway to come see me, I can understand that well enough."

"……Certainly, if you say it like that, I guess it's true. That may be true. However — just having a situation to deal with was already devastating for me. Who would have thought that Magokoro would escape with such unforeseen timing."

"It's because... of me."

Rurero-san said.

"If I had enough power, she wouldn't have been able to escape just from Jikoku leaving."

"Though it's dubious whether the situation would have changed if

Jikoku was there. It's like that time at the gymnasium. If you had appeared as planned, Magokoro would not have recognized my enemy. The root of the problem is you being loose with time."

"……I am truly sorry."

"I don't mind. After all, no matter what, it's all the same. Even if she didn't escape at that time, even if Magokoro didn't recognize my enemy — someday the same thing would have happened. Then the faster it happens, the better it is to prepare a counterplan. It just means that a problem was brought up to the surface."

As always, he was optimistic.

Uselessly front-facing.

"Now, I will explain the situation, Rurero."

The fox-masked man said.

As if he hadn't heard Rurero-san calling it unnecessary earlier.

What an impressively egocentric view.

Well, I was thankful for once.

I could learn how the fox-masked man viewed the situation.

The beating of my heart steadily slowed.

Calm down.

Calmly, I waited for the fox-masked man's words.

"How much did you know again? You know that Nureginu left the *Thirteen Stairs*, I think. Then,how about that — did you know that Raichi died?"

"……!"

Rurero-san — even without letting her voice out, I could feel her surprise through her abrupt movement.

It seemed she didn't know.

Emoto-san was probably keeping it a secret from her patient……. for Rurero-san's mental state.

"What, so you didn't know?"

"I heard that he was being treated at a different place."

"I see. Well, it was a shame."

"……"

Kino Raichi's death.

Against the fox-masked man, who could summarize it so matter of

factly,

once again, Rurero-san went silent.

I couldn't read their minds.

What could they have been thinking about?

"We lost a precious fellow. It was invaluable for *Killing Names* and *Cursing Names* to show up before people, after all. I truly think that."

"Did Raichi... suffer?"

"He probably did. Same as Izumu, his stomach burst open. I wonder what it is, maybe that Magokoro girl has some kind of trauma — it seems that she has a preference towards bursting her opponents' stomachs open."

"....."

"Don't get so depressed. It's not your fault. Besides, with Magokoro turning against us, it's already a miracle that you're alive. You should rejoice over that first."

".....I can't think about things like that."

"Well, maybe that's how it is… it was also a mistake on my part. I underestimated Magokoro. At that gymnasium, among those four, she could only kill one of them, right? To be honest, at the time, I'd thought she would have killed all four of them. But only Niounomiya Izumu died; Yamiguchi Houko, Ishinagi Moeta, and Aikawa Jun all survived. And without receiving many injuries. Plus, Izumu should already have died in August, so to fulfill that purpose, he was **easier to kill**. Counting that, in the end, Magokoro didn't kill anyone with her own power."

"....."

"But that wasn't because of Magokoro's lack of strength, and neither was it because Magokoro had just woken up. Maybe it's simply because **my enemy was there**. If I had understood that — Raichi wouldn't have had to die."

The fox-masked man spoke indifferently.

"However, even then, it's unbelievable. An existence that wouldn't lose her free will, even under *Kino*'s, *Tokinomiya*'s, and more importantly, your techniques. It should normally be impossible. A nil and non-existent chance. Even my daughter, Humanity's Strongest,

Aikawa Jun — if she was under you three's chains, she wouldn't be able to move an inch."

"Well, at the very least, I'm confident enough about that."

"I am certain. But if it were for that, instead of Noise, I should have gotten one more person with cursing techniques. I guess I put too much emphasis on the legend of the three arrows. No, even if I had done that, it would have been the same in the end, huh."

"Now—"

Rurero-san said, as if resolving her will.

As if keeping me in check.

A line that seemed to keep me in check.

" The Orange Seed — where is she?"

"........Hm."

The fox-masked man sighed meaningfully.

It's bad….did he notice me?

No, calm down.

The fox-masked man always sounds meaningful.

What am I doing taking everything he does seriously?

"Rurero, you must have a general idea. Because you were Magokoro's *caretaker*. Magokoro's current location is probably my enemy's stronghold, that worn out apartment. Though I have yet to confirm it, she should be there."

"You haven't confirmed…… Why is that?"

"Because there is no meaning in confirming it. I purposely didn't check. We should refrain from acting rashly. Also, this is something that I haven't said to any of the *Thirteen Stairs* yet." The fox-masked man said. "The old man Zukin passed away."

".....Zukin-san did?"

This time too, Rurero-san seemed surprised, but it wasn't enough to make her waver. Rather, she immediately asked back "What does this mean?" with some leeway.

"Zukin-san was killed? By Magokoro?"

"Don't jump to conclusions, Rurero. The old man Zukin only died because of his age. Magokoro is unrelated. Officially, it was something about his heart or his aorta, but — well, in any case it was a peaceful

death."

"…….I see."

"In a sense, he must have been fulfilled to be able to reach the end of his lifespan in the midst of this great war I am holding."

"When did it happen?"

"Earlier this month. Before Magokoro even escaped."

"So you kept it a secret."

"Well, yes. I wanted enough time to judge Zukin's alternative. I just replaced the fifth step directly with the old man's descendant, so to ascertain it, to judge **how she fits** in the *Thirteen Stairs*, I wanted some time."

"……His descendant…… the twelfth, was it? I heard this from Zukin-san, but isn't she just a regular high school girl, though?"

"What an honest old man. And what an amazing memory, too. You'd normally forget this kind of thing. That's right. The Twelfth Furuyari Zukin's heart, body, skill, and head are still those of a cute, developing young girl. Until now, when replacing a lost stair, I slid the steps down by one — but, well, since that girl is also *Furuyari Zukin*, I will make an exception this time."

"And? How do you judge her?"

"**Very well**."

The fox-masked man said so.

"**That girl is — the best**."

I thought I'd misheard him.

Furuyari Zukin.

Zukin-chan, the highschool girl.

Describing that girl, did he really call her the best? Naturally, the fox-masked man paid no mind to my confusion and continued his appraisal of Zukin-chan.

"I was busy with the Magokoro business, so I couldn't introduce her to the other stairs, but I will eventually show you……. Among the talents I've dug up until now, she sits within the top five. Just after Hagihara Shiogi. Having her as an *enemy* would be meaningless, but as an ally, she's the best."

"…….That's quite a positive opinion."

"Yeah. Of course, she's still in the process of developing — although, that's also part of what makes her so great. At the very least, she works well enough as Furuyari Zukin's alternative for now."

The fox-masked man summarized it like that.

It didn't seem like he was joking.

.....I was so sure that Zukin-chan was chosen just to fill numbers, to complete the stairs. Just one of the fox-masked man's whims, that he made her join the *Thirteen Stairs* on one of his eccentric impulses, but — I was wrong.

Was there some meaning to it?

To an existence like hers.

To such a common girl.

An uncommon meaning.

"Did you use *Unsigned* as a bait, like with the old man?"

"Calling it bait is a bit harsh, but — well, you're right. It seems that the girl has no obsession over *Unsigned* herself, but she wants to honor the old man's will. Rare nowadays, a kid so devoted to her family. She reminds me a little of Rizumu."

"....."

"Aah, you never got the chance to meet Rizumu. Then pay no mind to what I just said. It's just trifling sentimentality."

"I will do just that. I have no interest in your sentimentality." Rurero-san said. "Then, in regards to Zukin-san's step, since it only changed from the eleventh to the twelfth, only three people effectively left the *Thirteen Stairs*: Magokoro-chan, Nureginu, and Raichi."

"No, since Noise retired, it's four people. Noise's injury was even worse than yours. Despite only being hit by a car, the one driving *was* my daughter, after all. Well, Noise's body didn't have any experience with battlefields and carnage, so it cannot be helped."

"Then….. if we remove Kajou-san, there are only eight of us left."

"That would be correct."

Though I wouldn't remove Akira.

The fox-masked man boasted about that.

In reality, since Emoto-san was cooperating with me and I had a non-aggression pact with Zukin-chan, only six were left, but from how

the fox-masked man spoke, I guess he didn't know that yet; he hadn't seen through it. Hmm. Thinking about it, perhaps just knowing that those two could move freely was helpful information.

However,

"That being said."

The fox-masked man went on.

"**Even for these eight, it's not like there is no problem**."

"Eh……?"

Rurero-san's reaction was a doubtful one.

I don't think it's possible, but had she forgotten about me sitting directly under her bed? It made me wonder about that.

"What kind of problems? When you say 'these eight', does that mean I'm included?"

"Yeah. I came here to discuss that, Migishita Rurero."

"Discuss..."

"About Magokoro."

Ignoring Rurero-san's confused reaction to those words, the fox-masked man continued at his own pace as usual, in the same way as he's always done, and aligned more words.

"Because Magokoro moved to their side — because she moved to my enemy's side, the developments that I had planned, that I had foreseen are all for naught."

".....Sorry."

"As I said, that's fine. Don't apologize any more. It feels like you're calling me incompetent. Hm. Well, even if you were, I couldn't deny it. After all, everything was ruined."

"....."

"You could even say everything crumbled to the ground."

It would be rude to retort from under the bed, but I really wanted to do it.

"After that, I had to deal with the situation and completely stopped thinking about the fight with my enemy. Although it happened just a few days ago, I already feel nostalgic. Maybe carefreely waiting for my enemy to recover was a failure."

"....."

"Right. The problem that I have is that even though I've had a pause, my enemy must have been coming at me without caring."

".....I don't really understand. You — mister fox, do you think eight of the *Thirteen Stairs* aren't enough to fight *Ii-chan*?"

"It's not that. I thought this kind of thing might happen, so I subtly told my enemy to wait for my approach. However, I didn't come here to talk about that."

.....

Huh…….. Was that intended to be subtle?

I feel like he just told it straight to my face.

"And... Right, Rurero. Hypothetically, what would you do? If you were alone and didn't have any weapons or techniques, to make it so that there were as few victims as possible around you — if you were trying to win, what means do you think there are?"

".....If you could do that then you would be the strongest."

"No, that's wrong. My daughter was called the strongest, but if she were to act, it would often end up with more victims than it normally would have. Rurero, the important thing is the goal of 'making it so that there are as few victims as possible around you', that part."

"You would take down the opponent's leader; in this case, you, mister fox."

"Not that either. That's wrong too."

The fox-masked man seemed to be having fun.

"Because in this case, the definition of the word *around* includes even the enemy — he is planning on making as few victims as possible, even among his enemies."

".....? There's no way……. anyone could think like that."

"There is. That's my enemy." The fox-masked man answered strongly. "It is frightening and absurd, but that man, the Nonsense User, is trying to finish this without even injuring me."

".....What are you saying? It's not like you to say that. You're definitely overestimating that — that *Ii-chan*."

"It's not that. It's not like this is just just my own personal impression. The one who for some time stuck to him and monitored his actions — the one who investigated his past and future, Yamiguchi

Nureginu, said so."

"Nureginu did?"

"That's why Nureginu hurriedly left the *Thirteen Stairs*, **even making their master change their orders**. Even though they should have stayed at my side until my wish was fulfilled. Hm. Well, that being said I don't know how the person in question perceives the situation."

"The person in question, you mean *Ii-chan*?"

"Yeah. He himself might be thinking something along the lines of **I will kill him**. It doesn't matter. It's the same either way. But thinking from that viewpoint, the tactic of 'taking down the leader' is possible. However, even then — it won't go that easily."

"Yes — because we are here."

"Exactly. Then, what would you do? It's useless to put on airs. You know, I... I can generally predict what my enemy's plan is — in short, it's guerrilla warfare."

"……?"

"**He wants to make every member of *Thirteen Stairs* betray me, one by one**."

"……!"

Rurero-san's thoughts were directed towards the bottom of the bed.

It creaked that way.

Betray.

The one to say that word first was Rurero-san. But, it seems that even she didn't imagine it would include every one of them.

However…..

As expected, I guess.

Even without noticing that was the case for Emoto-san and Zukin-chan, he could guess that with his instinct alone.

"For me, someone expelled from causality, the *Thirteen Stairs* are essential to affect the Story, a lifeline. Cutting that from me is close to a starvation technique. My only option is to hold down the fort, but — there aren't many cases where that strategy has worked in the past. Hm. Perhaps he's already drawn a few people to his side. Since the

day he got discharged — the same day as when Magokoro escaped from us — a good amount of time has passed."

"Impossible……. That can't be."

Rurero-san seemed like she couldn't believe it, but since I'd come here, she didn't have any basis to refute the fox-masked man.

"His final goal would be... to make even me betray. If he can manage that, I'll give him full marks. **If he can even make me betray myself**, then there's nothing left for me to say."

"....."

"Well, there is also the possibility of coming straight for me. After all, he seems quite afraid of me."

"It... seems so."

Rurero-san answered like so.

Maybe she was remembering our conversation.

"Mister fox, how…" Rurero-san then asked. "How feasible do you think that plan is, realistically?"

"Making me betray myself — if you exclude that part, well, it's not completely impossible."

The fox-masked man answered instantly to Rurero-san.

"The probability of success is around a high eighty percent, I guess."

"Eighty percent…… That much?"

"Eighty percent is by no means a high number. For a battle plan, it's on the low side. But even then, it's a number worth gambling on."

"I-I won't betray you. I'll never betray you! I swore loyalty to you. I swore to do anything to achieve your objective. And it's as you said — this body's wounds are my pride."

Rurero-san said in a protest.

"I won't betray you."

"No, you will."

Easily —

bluntly, the fox-masked man said.

"Don't underestimate the Nonsense User. Don't take him lightly. He's the one I chose as my enemy, you know. Didn't you approve of that?"

"....."

Rurero-san went silent.

I did too, although I couldn't talk anyway —

I had no words to respond to the fox-masked man with.

This situation is hard to deal with, I thought.

Really — it's hard to do.

"If, hypothetically, my enemy had contact with all of the eight steps left, the only one to not betray me would probably be Konomi. The rest would all be swallowed. Even the Miotsukushi Sisters, who hold an extreme hatred for him at the moment — because they hate him, they will be simply swallowed, without a doubt. I guarantee it."

"No matter what, that couldn’t happen." Rurero-san reacted in an instant. "For that Utage girl or Jikoku, it could certainly be possible, but the Miotsukushi's Takami and Misora will never betray you. They swore loyalty to you. And... me too."

"In this case, that loyalty is a hindrance. However, well, that being said... No, talking for too long would be bad for your injuries."

"I don't mind."

"I mind. Listen, everything up till now were assumptions. My assumptions. It's up to you how you choose to think, but I will continue the conversation according to those assumptions. Okay?"

It was a pressuring way of speaking.

Even I felt stressed.

After a few seconds’ pause,

".....Yes."

Rurero-san answered.

Though she seemed really disapproving.

The fox-masked man, however, seemingly without a care for it, said "Hm." —

"Migishita Rurero."

— and called her name.

"If I were my enemy, the first one I would think to approach would be you."

"....."

In that moment,

even without knowing that I was in the middle of doing that, the fox-masked man declared confidently.

"Mm. What happened? That is a weird reaction. Perhaps he has already contacted you in some way, Rurero?"

".....No."

Rurero-san refuted the fox-masked man's words.

"It's not that. It's really not."

"....."

It wasn't because she thought I was pointing my gun straight at her chest from between the bed's planks.

The words from earlier had probably worked.

No, you will — the fox-masked man's words.

Hearing that, her loyalty — it wavered slightly.

Really slightly.

But, it had certainly wavered.

Therefore, Rurero-san postponed it.

For me, I could only say that I was saved.

"Hm." The fox-masked man said. "Well, that too is the same either way. Anyway, about what my enemy will think about first: when Magokoro was in my hands, he wanted to take her back, although I wonder if 'taking back' is the right expression for it. Anyway, he would normally think about stealing her from me. However, unexpectedly for me or my enemy, Magokoro returned to him on her own. The next thing my enemy would plan to do is — to remove the chains you guys put on Magokoro."

To an astonishing degree, my movements had been read.

As if reading destiny……

As if reading the Story.

"So, either Jikoku, Raichi or you — for now, he would try to contact those three of the *Thirteen Stairs*. If it's the same thing no matter who he goes for, then it's natural to want to catch two birds with one stone."

"That's... I guess."

"Among those three, the easiest to approach is the one who is seriously injured and cannot move, so you. From hearing out

Magokoro, my enemy would naturally think that. Although it's unknown if Magokoro knows about Raichi's death and your wounds, even if she didn't remember that, he would have already seen that you were not in good form at that gymnasium."

"....."

"Now that Raichi is dead, only Sonoki can dispel his *poison*, but for Sonoki and for Jikoku — even contacting them is difficult. But if my enemy felt like it, he could find out the location of an injured person. That's why, among the *Thirteen Stairs*, you are the easiest to lead astray."

"....."

Well, in reality, I'd started by approaching Emoto-san, but that was just because I'd gotten her phone number without the fox-masked man noticing…… That's the only reason. If that wasn't the case, I would certainly have chosen Rurero-san as the first target…. Even encountering Zukin-chan was just a coincidence……..

Really scary.

As if, I was in the palm of his hand.

As if, playing with destiny.

"My enemy will contact you in the near future. And, he will first demand that you release Magokoro of her chains, then second — that you betray me."

"....."

Exactly.

From under the bed, I nodded alone.

"Of course, considering my enemy's personality, he wouldn't force you — **he will induce you to release the spell and betray me, of your own will**."

"....."

That too was right on the money.

I nodded even more deeply.

Being in the palm of his hand to this extent felt strangely gratifying.

The problem was...

What the fox-masked man would do about that.

How would he respond to my moves?

"Would I..."

Rurero-san said in a trembling voice.

"**If that's the case**…… at that time, do you think I — this puppeteer, Migishita Rurero — would act as *Ii-chan* wants me to?"

"I do."

The fox-masked man replied briefly.

"Talking eloquently, flattering and deceiving — if you stand up you are a liar, if you sit you are a swindler spouting sophistry…… what a cute guy. That man — he is even more ill-natured than I imagined him to be……."

"……..You're overestimating him aga-"

"That means my overestimation was still an underestimation — hey, Rurero. No matter what you think, I am convinced that you will betray me — it's guaranteed."

"…….Then what should I do?"

Rurero-san said angrily.

"While I can — want me to get rid of him?"

"Don't say such dangerous things. If that were the case, I wouldn't have bothered coming here myself." The fox-masked man said calmly. "Don't misunderstand — I didn't come here to ask for advice, and I obviously didn't come to visit you, either. I came to give you an order, Rurero."

"……."

"Migishita Rurero of the *Thirteen Stairs* — in the near future, when the Nonsense User, my enemy, appears before you — do what I instruct you to now."

"…….Yes."

Rurero-san answered in a small voice.

The atmosphere was tense.

The fox-masked man ordered.

"**Betray me**."

"……."

Those words were anticlimactic.

To Rurero-san, who was as, no, even more dumbfounded than me,

the fox-masked man further explained his disappointing words.

"In other words……. what I mean is this: don't do it of your own will, **betray me of my will**. If he wants you to release Magokoro's chains, then release them. If he wants you to stop cooperating with me, then at least for the coming battle, don't cooperate. If he wants you to leave the *Thirteen Stairs*, then leave."

".....B-but."

Rurero-san was obviously flustered.

Her reaction showed that she still didn't understand what was going on.

"Th-then, in the end, won't it be the same—"

"If, in the bottom of your heart, you don't lose your loyalty towards me, it's fine. Just don't resist uselessly. The more you resist — the more you go against him, the more you will be trapped in his nonsense. Keep your boundaries vague. Even with Nureginu's investigation, it's unclear how consciously he does it, but at the very least, he has always survived like that until now."

"....."

"When you are bitten by an animal, instead of forcibly pulling your hand out, push it further in — that's what this is. If you do that of your own will, your loyalty will not be lost."

"But Magokoro-chan—"

"Yeah, that's not a problem of will or feelings, but something much more realistic, so it cannot be helped — however, I don't care. As long as your will is fine."

"But… mister fox." Rurero-san faced the fox-masked man, as if she couldn't understand. "If I followed those orders... I wouldn't be able to follow mister fox's order, would I? Maybe I won't lose my will and loyalty, but— "

"That's fine."

"That's fine, you say?" Rurero-san looked astonished. "Mister fox — are you trying to say that you don't need me? That I am not necessary within the *Thirteen Stairs*? Isn't that essentially dismissing me?"

"Dismissing — setting aside whether that's appropriate or not, well, it's pretty close to that."

"Then, do I just... leave the *Thirteen Stairs*?"

"Don't jump to conclusions, listen until the end. I don't have any intent to separate myself from you. Your techniques are wonderful. To the point that *Tokinomiya*, *Kino*, and even *Miotsukushi*, *Niounomiya* or *Yamiguchi* can't compare to them. That's how I evaluate it, the power that only you hold."

"....."

Just when it's necessary, he properly flatters Rurero-san. Don't mess around, I thought. Being ‘eloquent’ goes for you too.

However……. It was a bother.

My heart once again sped up.

The fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi.

As expected, this would prove to be tricky.

He’d sealed my moves.

Nonsense killing.

Though, the technique was different from what Utsurigi did...

No, calm down.

That alone isn’t enough yet.

With that alone, the result would still be the same.

Though the interior would be different, the result would be the same.

Even if the wills differed, it was the same.

If Rurero-san betrayed him...

"Hm."

The fox-masked man continued in his usual tone.

"That's why, even if you leave the *Thirteen Stairs*, the *Thirteen Stairs*' seventh step will always be yours. I will leave it open for eternity for you. Even if the *Thirteen Stairs* fall outside of my jurisdiction from the sweet words of that Nonsense User, as long as your will remains, come back whenever you want, Rurero."

"....."

"You can come back when the excitement cools down."

When the excitement... cools down?

I felt some discomfort in those words.

I mean, when the fox-masked man uses the word *excitement*, the

meaning was always completely different from the one I normally used.

Apparently holding the same doubts,

"That's not a real dismissal,"

Rurero-san said.

"Also, if *Ii-chan*, the Nonsense User, goes for me first — if *Ii-chan* hypothetically came here and tried to make me betray you — then, if we can avoid that using mister fox's method; what are you planning to do after that? To the other *Thirteen Stairs* — what kind of orders will you give?"

"The same order."

Mister fox answered Rurero-san, who was at her wit's end.

"Except for Konomi, though. Because of the nature of Konomi's abilities, there is no need to have her betray me herself. The seven excluding Konomi, the seven including you — I will have them all betray me and follow the Nonsense User's will."

"……I can't understand your intent." In a quiet tone Rurero-san said. "If you do that, you will end up isolated."

"In exchange for that, I will not lose most of the *Thirteen Stairs*. Try to put yourself in my shoes. Noise, Nureginu, Raichi, Magokoro — oops, and even before them, Rizumu and Izumu. That Nonsense User took six of the limbs I worked hard to obtain, six steps of the stairs — I need to avoid any more losses."

"……But-"

"The Nonsense User will make the seven, aside from Konomi, betray me without a doubt. **That is already decided**. There is no avoiding it. It has already... come to that. We have to make a move before that and put the other side behind — since everything got ruined, saying that now comes too late."

That's why, the fox-masked man continued without a pause.

"If I have them betray me in this way, later reparation, later regeneration is still possible. Of course, I intend to say the same to the other six. To Sonoki and Kudan and Zukin and Jikoku and Misora and Takami. If the Nonsense User asks for your betrayal, without resisting, obey him promptly."

"But — as I said!" Rurero-san finally raised her voice. "If you do that, you will end up isolated……. Guh!"

"Hey hey, don't push yourself — you're severely injured. I still need you to act as my limb in the future."

"Th……. then! Are you saying that you have a chance of victory? Against that — that absurd Nonsense User who can make all of us betray you!? Are you saying you'll face him alone!?"

"Not alone. There is Konomi. And, Akira too."

"Even then, that's just two people!"

"No, three."

"Don't fool around! You should understand — understand just how worried I am for you!?"

"'You should understand how worried I am for you.' Hm. Worried, huh. If possible, I would like you to trust me, though."

"S-stop mess—" Rurero-san got stuck on her words from her anger. " —! You're insane! If you say that much, then do as you like! But in exchange, I don't care about what happens! Because, whether you or *Ii-chan* wins, I won't have any place to return to!"

"You don't listen to others, do you? The place you should return to is under my orders. The seventh step of *Thirteen Stairs*. Though the number may change a little."

"I mean, it's evident that *Ii-chan* will defeat you! And, even if you manage to defeat *Ii-chan* with just Konomi and Kajou Akira — at that time, the world will end! Or what, is there a sequel to the *end of the world* you talk about, the end of the Story, the Dying Epilogue!?"

"None." The fox-masked man said. "There is no continuation, and so therefore it ends. That is self-evident."

"Then what do you mean!?"

Rurero-san's words — they were like screams.

Like screams asking for help.

Stabbing my chest.

Just hearing them skewered me.

The fox-masked man, however, didn't seem to care.

Hm, he handled it like always did.

"Listen. Rurero."

"What!"

"I decided to stop fighting my enemy."

Unconsciously,
a voice of surprise was about to leak out.
I instantly sealed my mouth with my hands.
Stopped my breathing.
My heartbeat reached its crescendo.
Even though we were so far apart,
it might have reached Rurero-san,
or even the fox-masked man.
"What…… did you say?"
Rurero-san,
to the unbelievable words of the fox-masked man,
barely reacted.
"What…… did you just say? Mister fox."

"I thought you heard me. From now on, I'll stop fighting — stop fighting the Nonsense User. I will not lay a hand on him. I will cease making him my enemy."

"S-stop—" Rurero-san said in a confused tone. "Th-that simply— "

"It's not simple. Even then, it's the result of long deliberation. I actually deliberated, for once. The last few days... you see. Well, if we were to use shogi terms, I resign."

"....."

"Him taking Magokoro was the deciding move. It was our bad play. It's like our rook, lances, gold generals, and silver generals got taken all at once. No, not just them — even the knights and bishops got taken. Also half of our pawns too, that kind of situation. Hm. The early retirement of Noise, whom I'd put in the *Thirteen Stairs* to counter him, was a real miscalculation. Anyway, I already have no moves left."

"B-but—"

"Of course, it's not like I threw away my objective. I will definitely see the end of the world. And I will show it to you. As promised, I will show you how this Story known as the world will end by the hand of

its creator, also known as destiny. But, I've stopped the approach of making that Nonsense User my enemy."

The fox-masked man said.

As if laughing.

"He is too much for me to handle. It seems I shouldn't have done it."

"....."

"Despite what I said to you, I was underestimating him too. That overestimation was actually an underestimation. I was underestimating his Aimless Equation."

"Aim...less? Unconscious2?"

"No, the characters — No, no, well, either is fine in the end. Anyway — around him, everything goes wrong; no one's wish ever gets fulfilled. Even though he doesn't do anything, his surroundings go crazy on their own. An equation that only exists to be absurd and nil. Facing that, feelings and wishes and requests and prayers — they don't mean anything."

"......That's absurd."

"He is such an absurd existence that he was even capable of upsetting the Story. That's precisely why he had the qualifications to accelerate the Story. It's the opposite of what I said about the twelfth Zukin, but — there is no one worse to have as an ally, and no one more interesting to have as an enemy — or so he should have been."

".....Should have been."

"Yeah. However, even I didn't think he would also be a pain as an enemy. No, I thought about it. Because he is the enemy, my enemy, of course he would be a pain. That's why I thought about it. I knew, but I couldn't understand. Right, it's as I said earlier. Even enemies are a part of his surroundings. Then, I too — I too will go crazy. My thoughts and wishes and requests and prayers, they will never be achieved."

"Will……. never...."

"Of course, I was resolved when I began that fight — I didn't think that the *Thirteen Stairs* would end up unhurt. However, according to the original synopsis, Magokoro should not have left me. But that

thing, that thing that never should have happened, did in fact happen. It happened easily. Exceedingly easily. Because of the boring reason of Jikoku being coincidentally absent."

Boring... reason.

It was certainly a boring reason.

A breakthrough without any foreshadowing.

Or, contrarily irrational.

It didn't make sense.

It was absurd — the logic was absent.

"Probably, if I were to continue like this, I would lose the majority of the *Thirteen Stairs* — no, nearly its entirety. Even Konomi, though she probably wouldn't be enticed — since Magokoro ended up as the opponent's card, it wouldn't be impossible. And either way, I can't inflict any damage on the opponent with the *Space Creator* alone. I would lose all of my limbs except for Akira."

Right.

That was my way of fighting.

My currently active strategy.

Plucking his limbs, and in the end, the head.

Taking the head.

Crushing the head's objective.

"I can't have any more victims."

The fox-masked man said, as if summarizing,

and went silent.

Rurero-san was silent for a moment too,

"……So you're admitting defeat."

But she said that.

In an accusatory tone.

"Exactly. I surrender. I submit."

The fox-masked man answered lightly.

In an argumentative tone.

"If you were to only say the conclusion, I went after him only to taste defeat. I couldn't do anything."

"……"

"Then, you guys too — you don't have to do anything either. Just

let it be. Sell me out. That's the only way. I was the one to ask him to use his nonsense proactively, and I was also the one to make the first move, but I didn't think it would go like this. It's not worth it. It was a complete misjudgement on my part. I chose the wrong person to be my enemy."

"But... he's your enemy."

"Yeah. I still think that. He is my enemy, my archenemy. But, I was overwhelmingly lacking in strength. I was completely careless in the initial stages. Now, I have no means to oppose him. It would be too much to call him a one-sided rival, but that is certainly the truth. Thus, I retreat."

"A temporary retreat? You retreat for now, and rechallenge *Ii-chan* when the time comes—"

"No. I will no longer lay my hands on him. I will have no relation to him. I will sever my connection to him."

"Sever... your connection."

"Even that probably wouldn't be easy, but when I think about facing him, it's a much better option. I will choose another means to see the end of the Story. I will conclude this approach."

"End—"

"How many failures does this make? I'm already bored of counting……. but I still have a continuation. I can't force myself and have everything be ruined."

".....Mister fox."

"I can't let everything be for nothing."

"Y-you don't need to rephrase."

"Luckily, there is a silver lining. As the spoils of the battle with my enemy, this time, I still have the outdated model. I was thinking about quickly returning it to my enemy, but I will use it to its fullest. The new model switched to their side, so it should be sufficient for a trade. They don't have any right to complain."

"Then, you really..."

"Yeah. As I said, Rurero. If my enemy comes here — it doesn't have to be here, but anyway, if he comes before you — no matter what he says, obey him like a slave. You can't disobey. Release

Magokoro's chains, if he so desires. And no matter what happens, that will be my enemy's fault. It's not my problem."

"....."

"What about your answer? Will you not obey my order?"

"No—"

Rurero-san —

she returned a firm response to the fox-masked man.

"—Understood. Mister fox — as you wish."

"I am grateful."

The fox-masked man laughed, 'Kukukuh.'.

He seemed to be having fun.

I could only see him — as having fun.

The joy of his defeat.

Of resigning.

"Aah, one more thing, although I don't think I even have to say this — I don't want to have anything to do with my enemy anymore, so say everything that I just told you now to my enemy. That I apologize for everything up to now and that I am thankful. Well, I think the number of deaths on both sides is about equal, but it doesn't change that I was the first one to move."

"So you intend... to not meet him."

"'So you intend to not meet him.' Hm. That's what I think I just said, Rurero. I have seen a lot of humans until now, but I have never seen anyone like him outside the mirror."

"....."

"What do you think, Rurero? This is out of simple curiosity but, between me or my enemy, from your perspective — which one is worse?"

"That would be mister fox." Rurero-san answered. "No matter how I think about it, there's nobody worse than you out there. Retreating now, in this situation — nobody but you could do it."

"Hm. I wonder if you are praising me. That method is just an imitation--- not my original."

".....?"

"**Unchallenged and undefeated, and therefore the Last** — I

learned that from that child. Rather than being the way of the Worst, it's the way of the Last. A last resort. For the outdated model too, if they had put that into action ten years ago, everything would have been settled—"

"From now on, what will you do?"

"Let me see. For now, I will wait on the first floor for Sonoki to come back. I need to tell this to Sonoki too. Though it would be the same if you were the one to tell her, it's a problem of sincerity, so I can't skip out on it. After Sonoki, it will be Jikoku. Afterwards, Kudan, Zukin, Misora and Takami, Hm. Misora and Takami, the Miotsukushi Sisters will be hard to deal with. Until now, I've somehow managed to keep them in check, but if I told them that, they might explode. I may need to ask for some help……. I also want to quickly fill up the few missing steps."

"N-no, not that — more like, in the future."

"I told you, didn't I? The end of the Story, the end of the Story, the end of the Story. I may have some ideas already. Using the old model to its fullest. ……..Of course, at that time, I will have you be of use to me."

".....Naturally."

"I also want to come by again as a simple visit, but I will stay away from this place for a while. Because I don't want to meet my enemy, be it by coincidence or inevitability. For now, I want to completely lower the physical opportunities of contact. Mm—"

The fox-masked man suddenly stopped talking.

It seems he looked outside the window.

The parking lot, outside the window.

That means.

".....It looks like Sonoki came back. Hm. Having such a nice car openly, it irritates me……. What lousy driving. Hey hey, don't park next to my Porsche with that level of skill. In the first place, why do you go right next……. Hold on…… Wait, hey you! Bastard! What do you think you're doing!?"

He was falling apart.

It seemed that Emoto-san was quite bad at parking.

"Hm……. Good, that should do it."

It seemed that she managed to park without an incident.

The fox-masked man's legs moved.

"Then, I will go talk to Sonoki immediately — it would be a pain if she cried, so I have to be more careful about it than with you. I'm glad that you're so understanding. Then — Rurero."

"Yeah — sorry for this appearance."

"Hm—"

"Say hello to my enemy."

Then,

the fox-masked man exited the room.

He really went out.

I —

I hesitated over what I should do. I couldn't move.

I really didn't know what I should do.

I couldn't move.

Eventually, from Rurero-san,

"You can come out now."

those words came.

I obeyed.

I crawled out from under the bed.

"……Thank you very much."

Not knowing what I should say, for now, I thanked her. Rurero-san only said "Hah— " and kind of laughed through her nose.

"You don't have to thank me, I was forced to do it, after all."

"I apologize... for using such boorish methods."

"You don't have to apologize either, the gun didn't have any bullets. I knew from the start."

"……So you noticed?"

"Don't underestimate me, kid — I can guess the number of bullets inside from the shape of the gun and the way it's being held. Because I'm a professional."

"Impressive."

"How chic — far from being boorish. Possessing a gun but not

putting any bullets in it."

"I was just careless, that's all. I used up all my bullets before and forgot to reload."

"Let's leave it at that."

Rurero-san said so and then went silent.

I still didn't know what I should say.

It was unexpected for the fox-masked man to say something like that. I thought that he might have noticed me under the bed and put on a show, but it seemed that was not the case.

He was serious.

He seriously gave up on me.

But….. it was ridiculous.

For that fervent fox-masked man.

For the man willing to sacrifice anything to achieve his objective, Saitou Takashi — to give up this easily on beating me. Although the fox-masked man's advantage didn't change much just from Magokoro passing to my side, even then—

Disappointingly.

Cruelly, disappointingly.

No…….

Thinking about it, I was wrong.

The fox-masked man was certainly fervent, he was monomaniacal, but only for his objective. For anything other than that, this man showed a great indifference.

Indifferent and heartless.

And, for the fox-masked man, I was nothing more than an enemy.

Just an enemy.

Not an... objective.

The fox-masked man's objective was not me.

The world's end.

The Story's... end.

There was no need to obsess over me.

August.

In the research facility of Assistant Professor Kigamine.

The fox-masked man rejoiced and was delighted.

About his meeting with me.

About his meeting with — his enemy.

That joy was probably genuine.

But,

that didn't mean anything.

That level of joy — it was something replaceable for the fox-masked man. In the end, I was nothing more than a passing point — he chose me because I was replaceable.

That's why, it didn't have to be me.

It was fine with me, but —

it would have been fine with someone else too.

But.

"As you heard—" And, Rurero-san, "Unnecessary explanations are unnecessary, so I don't need to say anything more, do I? Because you heard it directly. Encountering him in a place like this — certainly, that's impressive.… Rejoice. This battle is your victory."

"Victory..."

I still hadn't done anything.

In August, in September.

And also in October.

In the end, I hadn't done anything, had I?

I hadn't done anything concrete.

"It's called a win by default — no, not quite. It's a… resignation. That means you were better than mister fox. Though I really can't accept it myself, but if mister fox said so, it can’t be wrong."

"B-but, but I-"

"I— what? Let's hear it."

"……I have to… stop mister fox. I need to stop him from achieving his goal, from ending the world—"

"Hah!"

Rurero-san,

she laughed, as if totally making fun of me.

"Spare me — spare me, please, *Ii-chan*. Mister fox said he won't lay a hand on you — nobody around you will get hurt now. Then, isn't it fine?"

"B-but—"

I was confused.

Confusion assaulted me.

My insides were stirring.

Words wouldn't... come out.

Not even an ounce of nonsense would come out.

"Don't play the good kid — the reason you moved in the first place was because someone important to you was hurt, wasn't it? Didn't you say something similar earlier? Mister fox said he won't do it anymore. You should understand it best — you no longer have any reason to be proactive."

"....."

Certainly, that was spot on.

If mister fox wasn't going to set anything up for me, if the *Thirteen Stairs* wouldn't show any reaction to my words—

I was completely out.

Completely at a stop.

What a thing…… he got me.

It wasn't nonsense killing — he'd completely stopped my moves. Since I'd already had contact with Emoto-san and Zukin-chan, I felt like it was a bit late, however, it was still in time. That was a clever move against me from the fox-masked man's side.

Who said surrender — it was like a check.

This was completely a jury tie.

Even the vagueness was avoided.

The unknown would stay unknown.

It was a terrible punch line.

Coming this far and retreating,

Saitou Takashi.

It was no joke.

".....So? Should I release Magokoro's chains, *Ii-chan*? I'll do as you say."

"That….. please do it."

At least.

I needed her to do it.

Rurero-san gigled.

"Be at ease — this is a secret for mister fox too, or rather, only Jikoku, Raichi and me know this, but — it's simple to dispel the three chains cast on Magokoro."

"Simple……..?"

"What's the date today? I'm pretty loose, so I'm neglectful in keeping track of the time. Could you tell me?"

"The fifteenth."

"The fifteenth of October?"

"Yes. I don't even have to say that much. If there's anything to add, it's a Sunday. So what is it? Do you have a TV program you want to watch?"

"Don't come at me like that, hah. Then *Ii-chan*, you just need half a month of patience."

"Half a month?"

"Even if you don't do anything, by the time we get to the first of November, my *Puppetry* and Jikoku's *Thought Manipulation* and Raichi's *Poison* — all of them will completely disappear, as if they were a dream."

"……Even if I don't do anything?"

Rurero-san's words were somewhat shocking. She continued with an "of course", while I couldn't put my next words together.

"If you bring her here, I could undo it even faster. But thinking about Magokoro's body, it's for the best to leave her be. Mine and Jikoku's *techniques*, our *skills*, affect her mind, her insides — so if she spends time without meeting us, without entering in contact with us, it'll naturally wear away. And for Raichi's *poison*, he was essentially limiting Magokoro's body with drugs, so her metabolism will return to normal."

"……..That simple."

Aah...

But there was a hint.

In regards to Miiko-san's symptoms, the fox-masked man said that 'It's the sort of poison that will wear away within a week for those with strong life force—'.

That it will wear away...

I should have thought about it the same way.

Migishita Rurero.

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Kino Raichi.

Just waiting was enough...

"For Kino's *Poison*, I don't know exactly what it is, so it might be best to ask the Doctor to remove it artificially, but for mine and Jikoku's chains — it's better to leave it to the person's regenerative ability."

"That method of removal — mister fox doesn't know it, right?"

If he knew, he wouldn't have talked like that.

Rurero-san nodded.

"Mister fox didn't want to hear it, so he told us not to say it. Well, since he intended to keep Magokoro captive the whole time, whether he knew the way of removal or not, it would have been the same thing — rather, not knowing it, not bothering with useless things is better."

"....."

Not bothering huh.

"Now, what'll you do?"

Rurero-san asked maliciously.

"From now on, what'll you do? *Ii-chan*."

".....For now, I can't really trust all of that. I can't deny the possibility of him wanting to deceive me so that I let my guard down."

"Though you don't think that at all."

"Although not having to take the risk of going to see every member of the *Thirteen Stairs* individually — it is, while also regrettable, certain." I said. "As mister fox said, that's what I was planning to do. That was my plan. To begin that plan, I was first trying to have you betray him. Naturally, I was trying to have you betray him of your own will."

I continued to talk while slightly lying so that she wouldn't notice for Emoto-san and Zukin-chan.

"But now that it's come to this, there's no meaning in making a

strategy. Even if I pluck his limbs, he can still attach them back. Isn't it like a plastic model? Like a mobile figurine? Even if you pluck the limbs off something like that, it doesn't have any effect. And if its head isn't even turned towards me, it can't even feel it."

"That's right." Rurero-san smiled. "Even if he gets betrayed and betrayed and betrayed, our loyalty won't budge. Like a planarian." (TL : A flatworm, I don't get it)

Your nonsense will no longer work.

Rurero-san said so and closed her eyes.

As if she had won.

It was certainly my loss.

So winning or losing — that's what it is?

"……..If that's the method of removal, then I have no reason to meet Tokinomiya Jikoku anymore — so I'm at a dead end. No, no it's — it's really the closure."

This is... the end?

Counting from August, the fated battle with the fox-masked man that spanned over three whole months came to an end like that.

What a let down.

Precisely because it was a let down, it was the end?

Without any climax,

without any excitement,

without any catharsis,

or mystery solving,

or catchphrases,

without any stylish action scenes, it ended.

Of course, it wasn't like everything had ended.

It wasn't the end of the world or the end of the Story.

Returning back to routine.

Just returning to the normal days.

Just returning to a peaceful world.

After that, my usual life was waiting for me.

Normally.

Too normally.

I was going back — back to the starting point.

"Just in case….. I can't let my guard down. I'll still watch over your actions. But, if it's like that, then I won't lay a hand on you either. I promise a truce. I don't want to be involved in what you guys are doing anymore. Please transmit that…… to mister fox."

I said to Rurero-san.

Like the sore loser that I am.

"This battle is — my victory."

It seemed long and short.

It seemed short and long.

Eternity and an instant.

A never ending moment.

But — it wasn't over.

This was the end.

Kuchiha-chan.

Hime-chan.

Maki-san.

Rizumu-chan.

Izumu-kun.

Moeta-kun.

Everyone.

It seems that it's over.

".....Ah."

Outside the window, from the parking lot.

The porsche departed.

Despite what he'd said, he didn't have as much of a hard time with Emoto-san's conversation as he had with Rurero-san. He probably just briefly told what he wanted to be told and cut the conversation short.

He went home.

The fox-masked man went somewhere.

He went somewhere.

He severed his destiny with me.

He severed his connection with me.

He declared his rupture with me.

He went off somewhere.

We wouldn't meet again.
We wouldn't ever meet again.
Whether we had a connection or not.
We wouldn't meet again.
That's what I thought.

ACT 16 - LAST NIGHT

MIOTSUKUSHI MISORA

MIOTSUKUSHI TAKAMI

PROFESSIONAL KILLER

0

A disordered sequence.
Arranged from left to right.

1

October in Kyoto was, to put it simply, summer.

Hot.

Oppressively hot.

But, that being said,

time passed.

Too much time passed, and little by little, it became easier to endure. The intense heat, so strong that you could faint just from walking outside, was fading away little by little.

The few doubts that were left,

with time, they too washed away and faded.

Saitou Takashi.

As he'd declared, since that day, the fox-masked man had not made any move against me. Discussing it with Emoto-san, we decided to cancel our plan to approach the *Thirteen Stairs* — to freeze it.

So, there was nothing.

Nothing.

There was nothing left.

Emoto-san,

"Umm……"

After that, I'd been worried.

"I…….. from now on, what should I do?"

"What should you do, you ask—"

"Mister fox said it was fine to betray him…….. but I already betrayed him. From now on…….. what should I do?"

"Even if he stopped antagonizing me, mister fox hasn't lost his objective. If, like you said back then, you really, truly wish for the world not to end — you should leave the *Thirteen Stairs* of your own firm and resolved will."

"……..Right."

"But, naturally — that being said, you can't really leave Rurero-san alone. Emoto-san, you should continue taking care of her, at least until she's able to walk on her own again."

"Yes. That was originally…….. what I wanted to do. I am the doctor in charge of her, after all. I have to be there for Rurero-san for a few more weeks."

"Then, let's do that for a while."

".……It's not like this is a-a farewell, right?"

Emoto-san asked nervously.

"Y-you will contact me again, right? We will continue to be friendly from now on, right? W-we are friends, right? W-we will be friends forever, right? I-Ikkun."

"Of course. I still haven't treated you to the french crullers I promised."

Hearing my answer, Emoto-san smiled weakly, yet somewhat happily.

Anyway, my strategy, which should have forestalled the fox-masked man, ended up being beaten by his wit.

I couldn't do anything.

Without being able to do anything.

Only letting time pass.

Doubts fading, discomforts disappearing, tension running out — all that was left was everyday life.

Common and regular and ordinary.

What has changed? Nothing, really.

No.

Though it was gradual,

various things had been returning to normal.

Returning to normal.

First, Magokoro.

The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro.

As Rurero-san said, Magokoro's sleeping time gradually shortened — she became capable of acting for a longer time.

While she still ended up falling asleep halfway through, with Hikari-san's company, with her wearing a hat and sunglasses, we went to see a movie in Shingyokyoku together.

Everything was new for Magokoro.

It was obvious — everything up to now had been strange.

It had been crazy.

Everything reflected in her eyes was new,

A lot of things became sources of amusement.

Magokoro often exclaimed,

"Woow!"

Expressing her dazzlement.

That was, for me,

an object of happiness —

and,

of sadness.

What I'd been afraid of — it was nowhere to be seen. After the three chains were released, the worry of Magokoro going out of control and becoming too violent for me to handle — proved to be baseless.

Magokoro was able to properly hold her power back.

When playing sumo in the park with the kids that came to the apartment when they saw Miiko-san, she had enough leeway to be able to lose on purpose.

If I may add something, Magokoro was popular with kids, especially girls. It seemed the reason was just that she had the stature of a kid, so they felt some familiarity.

Innocent.

Naivete.

And not just that — in perfect health.

She was like the picture of health itself.

Although the chains hadn't been completely lifted — I guess about half of them were gone, with around a half of the other half still remaining — at this rate, I didn't think there would be any problems. In the end, I decided to not ask for Emoto-san's help and let her recover naturally, even for Kino-san's *poison*, considering her rate of recovery.

"So Magokoro. What will you do now?"

I asked at a suitable time.

I informed her that the fox-masked man stopped gunning for me, and once again asked her about her future plans.

Magokoro groaned first, then said,

"I will do as you want. I don't mind anything as long as I can be besides Ii-chan, but you would be bothered if I was too clingy, right? Also, I can't stay in that bedroom forever."

"I don't really mind."

"I can't do that. I don't have any money. On top of that, my body isn't well suited to earning it. Though I do have enough stamina to sell it... Ah, right. The thing you talked about before, what was it, Wet Crow's Feather Island? The place where Hikari-san works. Maybe I should live there. If the lady there likes geniuses, I'd be sooo very loved."

"It's an isolated island, you know……."

Moreover, she'd become insanely loved.

It would be a lovey dovey state.

One close to tragedy.

"Then should I live around here? Taking a job requiring stamina…… Mmm. But wait, do I even have a family register?"

"You should have one, I think? Though I don't really know. Well, I'll find out for you. If you don't have it, we can just make one."

"And Ii-chan?"

"Mm?"

"Ii-chan, what do you want me to do?"

"If possible, I would like to stay at your side, I guess. It would certainly be a pain if you were too clingy, but since you're alive, I want to hang out with you again."

"Hehehe."

"Well, it won't go exactly like before for either of us, but — let's do as we see fit."

"Right."

—And.

After having talked this much, Magokoro reached her limit for the day and fell asleep, so the conversation reached an end.

Well, we'll deal with all that later.

For now, let's wait for her complete recovery.

That was the current conclusion.

Speaking of recovery,

Miiko-san and Houko-chan.

As you would expect, these two weren't ordinary.

The twentieth of October.

Five days after the fox-masked man's resignation.

The two of them were discharged.

"We made you worry."

".....Sorry."

Miiko-san was aloof.

Houko-chan was a little awkward.

That reminded me, in the end, I hadn't visited Houko-chan again since then. When I apologized about that, ".....I didn't really want people to see me in a hospital bed anyway." Houko-chan said, even more awkwardly.

"Miiko-san."

"What?"

"Ah, no. Well, thanks for what you always do."

"Mm."

Miiko-san nodded generously.

She acted as if nothing had happened.

I could feel her style.

"Hospitals have an interesting odor."

"Yeah……."

"No wonder you spend a lot of time there."

"No, it's not like I stay there because I want to……"

"I don't ever want to."

She wasn't the type of person that let it appear on her face, but Miiko-san was fed up with hospitals from the bottom of her heart. Though it was just a groundless guess, Rabumi-san had probably played a big role in that. She had too much influence over the Story for such a small role.

"Now, I need to start training tomorrow. I'll train my body, which has become as dull as an old boat, once more."

She already had enough motivation.

That being said, neither of them had completely recovered.

Though it's obvious.

It seemed that Miiko-san was already pushing herself, and as for Houko-chan — ever since then, she's occasionally had flashbacks to that experience, leading to panic attacks.

Miiko-san's problem was physiological, so we can set it aside, but it's a mystery how Houko-chan was discharged in a state like that. At a later date, when I sneakily went to ask about it at the hospital,

"Rabumi-onee-sama! I miss my home very much! If I stay at the hospital any longer, I'll go crazy! If you let me be discharged, I will be in your debt for the rest of my life, so please!"

Something like that had apparently happened.

……..

Let's just pretend I didn't hear anything.

Anyway, the two came back to the apartment.

And by doing so, naturally,

"....."

"....."

"Mm? Who are you?"

They met Magokoro.

It was the first time for Miiko-san, but the problem was Houko-chan.

To be frank, there was a quarrel.

A quarrel involving the whole apartment.

However, even Houko-chan could understand that the one who killed Moeta-kun was Nureginu-san, and she was a girl who followed logic.

In the end, they broke the ice.

Magokoro was also a victim and a sacrifice.

There was no explanation needed about that, and for Houko-chan, Magokoro's way of life seemed to overlap with her own.

"If Onii-chan says so."

"It doesn't matter what I say, Houko-chan, decide with your own will. Aah, that's an order from your master, so obey."

"....."

So.

Magokoro and Houko-chan shook hands.

Magokoro took a liking to Houko-chan.

It seemed she didn't remember having kicked her.

Setting aside the genuineness of that memory, since I'd witnessed that moment, it was settled by Houko-chan dealing a high kick to Magokoro.

Anyhow, now, everyone was back.

The ones still alive.

Except the ones who'd died.

Except Moeta-kun.

"Nonsense User onii-chan."

"Yes?"

"If you'll allow me to be frank, I am a little lonely."

Since she'd said it so frankly there was nothing I could do. Thus, Houko-chan began to live in my room.

Me and Hikari-san and Houko-chan.

Three people living in a four tatami room was a tough situation.

I'll say it as many times as I need to, but October in Kyoto is summer.

If it was winter, we'd just have to huddle our bodies together, but in this mesothermal temperature, there was nothing we could do.

Even then, it was still hot.

There was still warmth.

But.

Five days later,

"I've caused you plenty of trouble."

On the twenty-fifth of October.

Chiga Hikari.

Hikari-san — returned to the island.

To Wet Crow's Feather Island, to the side of her master.

"A lot happened, so I extended my stay for quite a long time, but I can't possibly be absent from the island for much longer. Leaving the lady to Akari, Teruko and Rei-san... isn't advisable."

"……Is that so."

Though it was a shame, there's nothing we could do.

There was no longer any reason to stop her.

Now that we didn't have the threat of the fox-masked man.

There was no reason for me to bind her to this place.

I couldn't wish for her to stay here.

"We, too, only caused you trouble. Really, no matter how many times I thank you, it wouldn't be enough."

"Please stop — being useful to the one we serve is our only joy."

"But, please, let me thank you."

I thanked her.

Many times.

Many times.

Again, many times.

I repeated it for each time she took care of us.

Magokoro, who had become quite friendly with Hikari-san, however, didn't seem to be that sad when parting ways with her.

"I guess we'll meet again."

She said.

She was already thinking about the future.

That's typical of Magokoro, I thought.

Hikari-san wholeheartedly answered "Yes!".

"You can come over to the island at any time. I am sure that lady

will welcome you with open arms, Magokoro-san. Of course, you too."

She looked at me mischievously.

Aah, that reminded me, that's what she came for to begin with.

A trial period.

That was certainly an appealing proposition.

"Give my greetings to Iria-san, Rei-san, Akari-san and Teruko-san, and also Kasugai-san, and……. errr, that cook too."

"Yes, of course."

Then,

Hikari-san,

softly approached me,

"Goodbye, my own master."

And didn't say anything like that. But well, after some normal parting words, we saw Hikari-san off.

She'd become a resident of the rundown apartment before we knew it, so we felt like something was missing for the next few days. There was an empty hole left.

Chiga Hikari.

Or maybe, Chiga Teruko.

It had all ended while still vague.

I thought that was for the best.

Let's go to that island again someday.

This time, I clearly decided that.

I also wanted… to see Kasugai-san.

……Then I needed to hurry. Who knew where that frivolous vagabond might have gone next…..

And, well.

The room was a little more spacious.

A little, no, a lot more spacious.

"Onii-chan, do you like that kind of outfit?"

"Eh? No, not really."

"Since Moeta, who complained about everything I wore, isn't here anymore, as someone serving Onii-chan, I could dress up like that from now on."

"Mm."

"What happened?"

"Houko-chan."

"What is it?"

"You're ten years too early."

"....."

After exchanging this kind of conversation.

Three more days passed.

The twenty-eighth of October.

Kunagisa Tomo's return to the syndicate had become official.

I got that report on the phone.

"Once again, I don't really know what to say in this situation. I guess I should congratulate you."

"Uni. Well, it's not a bad thing."

"What's the schedule now?"

"Errr, at the end of next month, there's a sort of ceremony. To put it plainly, it's to show my face, or something like thaaaat. Work will begin for real at the start of next month."

"Hmm."

"The sorting out, or well, the preparations are also done. Now I just have to wait for it all to start again, like a sprinter in position, I guess. I'm a bit excited."

"I see. Well, we both have something to celebrate. Then, let's see, yeah, I'll come to congratulate you soon."

"Today? Tomorrow?"

"Don't rush it. I can't come by so soon. There's something called preparation. Including me preparing my heart. Also, your old teammates are in your building, right?"

"Yes. Not everyone, but five of them came. It's peaceful, kind of like an alumni meeting."

"I would feel bad going in there."

"Unii. Even though Ii-chan was the one who told me to call them."

Kunagisa said, dissatisfied.

But even I really wanted to rush right over to her. However, I still had to prepare.

Because I went so far as to propose to her.

I wanted it to be a little romantic.

I thought.

Though it may have been idiotic.

"Idiot."

The phone call got cut and Miiko-san was behind me.

She was inside the room without having knocked.

In jinbei.

"There's an idiot here."

"....."

"How peaceful."

".....Yes, it's peaceful."

"So peaceful it feels out of place."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"It's a good thing. Without a doubt." Miiko-san said. "What do you intend to do now?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Do you really want to let it end like that?"

Miiko-san was serious.

Though she was inexpressive, so I couldn't really tell, she seemed serious.

As usual, even though I still hadn't told her anything. I guess a swordswoman could tell that much.

It was hard to give an answer.

"Since the other side retreated it would be difficult for me. It was self-defense in the first place. From the beginning, it’s just been self-defense. I was just lighting some sparks. If the other side won't do anything, then it would just be revenge."

"I heard that avenging your friends is the best way to appease your heart."

"I don't have that mentality."

I don't.

The current me doesn't.

"Looks like it."

Miiko-san opened her iron fan with a bang.

"Anyhow, peace is the best."

".....I guess."
"Anyhow, invite me to the wedding."
That line was a sneak attack.
It seemed she'd been standing me for a long time.
"....."
"....."
Uwaah, it was so awkward.
Even though I was the one who got rejected…….
Just because I couldn't give up.
"There's no need to make a face like that, Inoji."
".....No, but."
"But I'll be a bit lonely, I guess."
"....."
"I'll be a bit hurt, I guess."
Miiko-san said.
"I feel like hitting you with a shinai."
"....."
Scary…….
"No, um, Miiko-san……"
"So? Do you think you can become happy?"
".....I don't know. But—"
I answered.
"It would be good if I could."
"A good line."
"That's the line of a man who fell in love with you."
"That's why you say such good things."
"I still like you, even now."
"I thought that might be the case."
Miiko-san smiled lightly enough that I wouldn't notice,
turned her back to me,
and left my room.
".....Tch."
Anyway, at that moment.
The romantic feelings that I'd been holding for Miiko-san,
what resembled a first love,

without anyone knowing,

Quietly — they came to an end.

"Onii-chan is such a womanizer."

Houko-chan said so from behind the ceiling.

……..Why is she behind the ceiling?

I thought.

"Ah, you connected this room to the one upstairs by removing the floor, didn't you?"

"Nin nin."

"So you really were a ninja….."

Her weird character building was confirmed.

The poor girl.

Koutoumaru-san trained his muscles as usual, still invested in his christian hobby, quarreling with Miiko-san. Nanananami sometimes went to university.

The twenty-ninth of October.

I went on a date with Sasaki-san.

The thirtieth of October.

I went on a date with Kazuhito-san.

And,

The thirty-first of October.

The end of October.

Nine in the afternoon.

I went to the Kyoto Imperial Garden.

Where I'd met Emoto-san thrice.

However,

this time, it was not to meet Emoto-san.

Furuyari Zukin.

To complete my promise with Zukin-chan.

To give her *Unsigned* — the small knife that *she* wanted so much, to the point of joining the *Thirteen Stairs* and obeying the fox-masked man.

In exchange, Zukin-chan would tell me the details of that knife, why the previous Furuyari Zukin wanted it so much — to be honest,

at this point, I didn't really care.

The fox-masked man should have told Zukin-chan the same thing as he'd told Rurero-san. Then the exchange, the promise, the non-aggression pact didn't mean anything.

I no longer had any reason to be wary of her.

I had no reason to be afraid of a possible trap.

For now, I took out the knife from the holster under my jacket, practiced a few swings and put it back.

That kind of thing — I should just give it away.

It wasn't something important to me.

You could even call it worthless. For me, a knife that cut too well wasn't easy to use. Whether that reason made sense or not, even if Zukin-chan wanted to sell that knife for money, I didn't care either way.

She should do as she wants.

I thought that.

That's what I was thinking, but —

"……What's this?"

I felt a slight attachment.

No, is attachment the correct word?

No, rather — something lacking, I guess.

In front of the Kenreimon,

on the bench from where you could see the aphananthe tree, I sighed.

Half a month.

Since then, nothing happened.

Fifteen days of ordinary life went by.

There was nothing.

Just time passing.

Now that it came to this, no matter what, no matter who, anyone would have to admit it.

The fox-masked man,

Saitou Takashi had really stopped fighting me.

He'd ceased making me his opponent.

"That kind of sportsmanship was unexpected."

However,

it was also true that he was good at giving up.

I suddenly remembered something I'd learned at university.

The recently trending crime, stalking, was mainly born from romantic feelings and a monomaniacal mind, but it's common for those actions to calm down and, in most cases, suddenly stop one day without any warning.

Essentially, it means that their goal changes.

Like getting bored of a game.

Like getting bored of a novel.

A girls' heart and the clear autumn sky.

Though it wasn't something as sentimental.

That party.

That party at Sumiyuri Academy was the end.

Magokoro's escape was a lethal blow, huh.

Bad move.

And resignation,

that man, in the end,

hadn't named himself in front of me.

He hadn't revealed his name as Saitou Takashi.

In the end, you could sum it all up as the fox-masked man wrestling on his own. I'd done close to nothing. I just reacted to his actions. Even what I did had pretty much no meaning.

All that was left was emptiness.

".....And."

Unsigned.

Today, after I give this knife to Zukin-chan, everything will end.

The fox-masked man,

the *Thirteen Stairs*,

the connections will be severed.

We will no longer have any relation.

Naturally, it's not like everything will disappear.

Just like how there exist incurable wounds,

There also exist unforgettable memories.

Also,

I wonder if that was for the best.

They exist for sure.

The fox-masked man, Humanity's Worst, who desires to end everything. Letting him go — pretending not to see anything despite knowing so much — could that be forgiven?

Rurero-san laughed through her nose.

Exactly.

I can only say that was on point.

I wasn’t an ally of justice.

Fighting for world peace was not something I could do.

As long as today and tomorrow are peaceful, as long as my surroundings are quiet, I was a cheap man who would be satisfied just by that.

I was small-minded.

Not the Strongest, not even the Worst.

Far from the Last.

Nothing.

Just a Nonsense User.

If the clear autumn sky stops raining,

I cannot move.

But even then, something was bothering me.

What would the fox-masked man do, what means would he use, with which method would he try to welcome the *end of the world*, how would he see the *end of the Story*, and the *Thirteen Stairs* that I wasn't able to meet in the end — what would happen to them?

I had worries.

Too many to count them all.

But none of that concerned me now.

It didn't concern me now.

And even if it did, I wasn’t interested.

"……It's nonsense."

Aah, but — just one thing.

Someone that couldn’t be satisfied with being unconcerned.

Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

A lot of things had been steadily recovering from being involved with the Worst — returning to everyday life.

But Aikawa-san never came back.

Aikawa-san never returned.

Ever since that day — when the fox-masked man took her.

I didn't think that she was concerned about being defeated in one blow by Magokoro. She wasn't like that. She wasn't the kind of person to get excited by something like a knight-errant.

But she hadn't come back.

Kouta-san's investigation was fruitless too.

I didn't have any leads.

My daughter.

Outdated.

The fox-masked man — he said that he would **use** Aikawa-san for his next stage, then Aikawa-san was without a doubt still in the fox-masked man's hands.

I wonder what he would do.

Would he restrain her — like Magokoro?

Her stamina.

And body.

And consciousness.

Would he limit them?

No, that probably wasn't the case…… That man, the fox-masked man — he wasn't the type to repeat his mistakes over and over. If nothing else, he never repeated the same thing, be it a failure or a success. He put chains on Magokoro because he learned from the incident with Aikawa-san, but I couldn't imagine he'd use those same means on Aikawa-san. Even his defeat against me, he would only think of it as fuel for his next step.

Then, I wonder what he would do.

Using Aikawa-san.

Key.

Would he remove the lock……?

"Contractor... right……."

Certainly, as a limb — the strongest one in the world, bearing the

title of Alternative (Contractor), Aikawa Jun would be the best possible choice for Saitou Takashi. Even as an old model, Aikawa Jun would be easier to use for him than Omokage Magokoro.

Then the fox-masked man probably wanted to give Aikawa-san one of the spots of the *Thirteen Stairs* that went vacant after his battle with me. However, even if that was the case, I don't think Aikawa-san would accept it. I wonder what the fox-masked man would do about that—

No, I don't know.

Thinking about it, in that gymnasium, Aikawa-san's full attention was on Magokoro — she hadn't even noticed her father's existence.

Father.

Among Saitou Takashi, Kajou Akira, Aikawa Junya —

the only one she'd called her father was Saitou Takashi.

Despite saying how much she hated him and that she would kill him for sure next time — I guess someone like me couldn't understand Aikawa-san's heart.

If there was anything I had to be worried about.

If there was any concern I had to have.

It would be about Aikawa-san,

if you asked me whether or not I was curious, whether or not I wanted to know,

If you forced my hand —

".....No, you don't have to go as far as forcing my hand."

At any rate.

There was nothing I could do now.

Hikari-san had also been feeling down about the fact that Aikawa-san didn't come back, but in the end, that person, that existence is on an entirely different level than us. Being worried about her is just arrogance.

It's already over.

Everything is over.

I repeated those words once more, words that I'd recited to myself like a charm this past half-month, and reiterated that.

It's over.

With the minimum amount of victims.

As if nothing had happened.

It really…… ended...

".....However."

Zukin-chan — she was late.

The meeting should have been at nine in the afternoon.

I didn't think that this laid back blacksmith highschool girl would do something as paranoid as arriving one hour early like Emoto-san, but looking at my watch, it was already over a quarter past nine. Was Zukin-chan loose on time like Rurero-san? Having your socks loose should be enough; thinking that, I looked around the dark Imperial Garden, stood up from the bench and focused my eyes to take in my surroundings. As expected, unlike at noon or in the morning, there weren't many people. If there was someone nearby, I would notice immediately.

Did she forget our promise?

No, after saying that much….

I was beaten. I didn't know how to contact that girl……. She was a modern highschool girl, so she must have had a cellphone. I should have asked —

"*Ii-chan*."

"*Ii-chan*."

Being called,

turning to the direction of the voice, thinking it was Zukin-chan.

Thinking that she didn't have to say it twice.

You're late — as I was about to complain.

I turned back.

When I turned back, certainly there was Zukin-chan.

But just half.

Just her top half.

Her organs were sloppily hanging out.

Blood was scattering profusely.

Blood was dripping off.

Slumpily looking down.

Without any chance of life left in her.
Her living functions had clearly stopped...
"....!"
Her arms —
her arms were that of a fragile girl.
On both sides.
On one side each,
on both sides,
from both sides,
as if doing a banzai pose,
she was held,
she was supported,
about ten centimeters off the ground,
like a specimen,
as if showing her,
she was hanging down.
She was hanging…. down.
"Wh……..wh-wha!? Zu-Zukin—"

"Ninth step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Miotsukushi Misora, appearing."
The girl on the right said.
"Eighth step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Miotsukushi Takami, appearing."
The girl on the left said.

Swoop.
The two of them threw Zukin-chan.
They threw her towards me.
Violently.
Inhumanly.
Ferociously.
As if,
denying the end.
As if saying that it would not end.

2

Grandpa, you see — Zukin-chan said.

"He didn't really want me to follow in his footsteps."

"Really?"

When I asked back, Zukin-chan affirmed with a "Yes.".

"I guess he didn't want me to get in too deep. Saying it was a world for men. I only ever did it by imitating. In the end, grandpa, up till his death, taught me nearly nothing."

"But you inherited the title of the twelfth, right?"

"Officially, yes. I can't let the name of Furuyari Zukin disappear that easily. But it seems that grandpa wanted to rely more on my kids."

"So you have kids."

"Who does!"

A common retort.

When you're so used to it, getting a surprisingly normal retort instead of a weird and warped one wasn't so bad.

Anyway, she certainly was lively.

Like she was overflowing with energy.

"Well, in the first place, grandpa had mom late in his life. He was unlucky to not be able to see his great grandkids at ninety-eight, but I’m just sixteen."

"A first year?"

"Nah, second year."

"Having both school and learning blacksmithing. Must be hard."

"Not really. It's fun. I guess it's because I like grandpa — no matter how against it grandpa was, I’ll show him show him show him that I can become a great blacksmith too."

"You don't need to show him three times."

What kind of service mentality is that?

Fuumu, I crossed my arms.

"What are you going to do from now on? Now that your grandfather's passed away."

"Mm. I'm being taught by a blacksmith acquaintance of grandpa. There are limits to learning alone, after all."

"Do you like blades?"

"If you put it like that, it sounds dangerous. Hmm, I wonder. I'm not really sure. If you asked me whether I like them or not, I guess I'd say yes, but it's not like I like them that much either. I think they're pretty, but the thought of them being dangerous is stronger. Mm, right, I guess, how should I say it, I don't really know."

"You don't know?" I tilted my neck to her answer. "I really thought you'd be into them."

"Is that so."

"It is."

"That's not the case."

"That must be the case. Don't say absurd things. In the first place, if you didn't like them at all, you wouldn't be able to do it, would you? It must be tough being a blacksmith."

"That's why — I told you. What I love is grandpa."

Zukin-chan said with a bright smile.

It was really bright.

Without an ounce of doubt or worry.

"It was something that grandpa loved enough to do for his entire life, so I want to like it too— "

Zukin-chan said that.

Said that.

Just said that.

The conversation ended here.

Oops, I talked too much. We'll continue this when you give me *Unsigned* — and.

With that —

with that, it was over.

But.

Though it was over, it wasn't the end.

It ended, but it wasn't the end.

"No—"

"No—"

The Miotsukushi Sisters said in turns.

"Since *Nureginu the Concealed* left, I may become the eighth step."

"Since *Nureginu the Concealed* left, I may become the ninth step."

"Oops, since we just dealt with the traitorous fifth step, I will become the seventh step."

"Oops, since we just dealt with the traitor fifth step, I will become the eighth step."

"I need to make sure to not be wrong."

"I need to make sure to not be wrong."

Like howling —

with the same moves on both sides,

in symmetry,

the girls — they existed before me.

Priest robes.

Priest robes that seem to mix with the darkness.

Inside the Imperial Garden, they didn't feel out of place.

Far from that, it was as if this place,

as if this garden,

was a stage for them.

"Zukin-chan..."

Being thrown.

Seeing Zukin-chan being thrown away like garbage, I couldn't do anything and just looked at her below me. Groveling on the floor, like a youkai without a lower body...

As if clouded,

as if lost...

Her corpse.

Her neck was pointing in the wrong direction,

her expression reflected in my eyes.

Nothing reflected in her eyes.

Hollow.

Warped in pain... and hollow.

Dead.

Dead beyond anyone's control.

Even expressing it like that wasn't accurate.

This was already... an object.

There was no longer any human dignity.

No dignity.

That kind of thing — it was trampled over.

Was violated.

"Y-you are—"

I,

looking back and forth at Zukin-chan and the Miotsukushi Sisters — I was barely able to pronounce those words.

"You girls did it?"

"Foolish question."

"Foolish question."

The sisters answered in turns.

"We dealt with the traitor."

"We dealt with the traitor."

"This thing."

"This thing."

"Despite being in the *Thirteen Stairs*, it interacted with the enemy."

"Despite being in the *Thirteen Stairs*, it interacted with the enemy."

Death to the traitors.

The sisters said just those final words in unison.

"....."

Wh-what……..?

Hold on, don't be confused.

You should be calm in these situations.

However, even if I understood this logically, since almost all my doubts, worries or attachments over the situation had faded, I couldn't deal with this abrupt and rapid development.

I couldn't deal with it.

All I could understand was that my breathing was rough.

Zukin-chan.

Looking closely,

my eyes had been too focused on the fact that she had no lower body, so I overlooked it, but — on her arms and face, there were small cuts, an uncountable amount of wounds.

Scars, as if she had been tortured.

The scars of someone who was tortured.

Cruel.

I couldn't… look.

Traitor.

Traitor.

Because... she interacted with me?

That day — because she met me by chance?

Just because of that?

"Mi-mister fox—"

I said.

Glaring as harshly as I could at the Miotsukushi Sisters.

".....I thought he wouldn't lay a hand on me."

"Fuh—", Misora-chan.

"Fuh—", Takami-chan.

They laughed in the same way.

They laughed, making a fool out of me from the bottom of their hearts.

Distorting her face repulsively.

Distorting her face repulsively.

Misora-chan smiled.

Takami-chan smiled.

The Miotsukushi Sisters — they smiled.

"**That doesn't matter**."

"**That doesn't matter**."

"I."

"I."

Misora-chan,

and Takami-chan said, in a literal chorus.

"**I can't go back if I don't kill you — as long as I don't kill you, I can't face mister fox**."

"**I can't go back if I don't kill you — as long as I don't kill you, I can't face mister fox**."

"……!"

The fox-masked man...

That bastard, so he'd failed to persuade them!

There's a limit to how little authority he can have...

At least deal with your defeat!

Why would a bird foul its own nest!?

Briefly, I looked around us.

It was no good. It wasn't a situation where I could expect any help.

I hadn't told anyone that I'd be coming here.

I didn't want to make Houko-chan and Miiko-san worry, and even before that, I'd completely let my guard down.

I wasn't expecting an unforeseen situation.

Even though, until I gave *Unsigned* to Zukin-chan —

it still wasn't over.

My concentration dropped.

I was careless.

It was clearly... my mistake.

Because of that mistake,

Zukin-chan,

who originally shouldn't have died —

".....Why?"

Confused and in awe as I was,

I couldn't refrain from asking.

"Why did you…… why Zukin-chan? She didn't betray you guys — she still hasn't done anything."

Right — she hadn't done anything.

Sixteen years old.

Too young.

She didn't do anything… did she?

She was a common schoolgirl.

Normal.

Too normal.

To the point that becoming happy should have been a given.

She... was normal.

"She interacted with you — with just that, a sin is a sin."

"She interacted with you — with just that, a sin is a sin."

"Serving the interests of the enemy is a big sin."

"Serving the interests of the enemy is a big sin."

"Sins should be paid for with your life."

"Sins should be paid for with your life."

Death to the traitors.

Overlapping.

Their words overlapped.

Resolutely and blurrily.

The horizon was zigzagging.

I was bewitched.

It was like my vision had been sliced in half,

by the Miotsukushi Sisters' existence.

Izumu-kun, Niounomiya Izumu — he said that he'd defeated them easily, but they're absurd. That was just because Izumu-kun was overwhelmingly strong.

Their mere presence exuded a kind of pressure.

Like a rat stared at by a snake, my body froze.

"....."

Shit……

To be honest, I'd been underestimating them.

I gulped.

The fox-masked man estimated a success rate of eighty percent.

That I would be able to persuade everyone in the *Thirteen Stairs* except for Kajou Akira and Ichirizuka Konomi.

But…… they're no joke.

There's no will.

There's no loyalty.

There's only… fanaticism.

…..Izumu-kun had been highly displeased that Misora-chan and

Takami-chan were chosen to replace him and Rizumu-chan in the *Thirteen Stairs*, but I was convinced.

This wasn't just about their abilities as *professional killers*.

These girls —

these girls were abnormal.

Certainly, Zukin-chan got in contact with me before receiving orders from the fox-masked man and exchanged a promise, but that was all. There was no need to kill her.

Where was the necessity to kill them?

This cruelly?

This ghastly?

This wasn’t a purge.

It was just massacre, wasn't it?

Shit…….

I wonder if Emoto-san’s fine……

Depending on how they think, Rurero-san might be a target too……

Miotsukushi Misora.

Miotsukushi Takami.

These two — they might do it.

Fanatics, fanatics, these Miotsukushi Sisters with their self-righteous faith in the fox-masked man — even Noise-kun who retired and Nureginu-san who resigned. At worst, those two might be considered traitors too.

Furthermore,

though she was not officially in the *Thirteen Stairs*,

Magokoro too.

No, Magokoro….. The Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro…….

If it was her — if it was Magokoro, who easily beat Izumu-kun and Aikawa-san, Misora-chan and Takami-chan weren’t a threat to her — and unlike that time, the current Magokoro was almost totally free of her chains.

Should I have brought her with me?

……..No.

That wasn’t the case.

I'd properly decided, didn't I?
That I would not use her.
That I trusted her,
and wouldn't use her.
I decided that I would protect her.
Without being shy towards Magokoro.
"Now, let's ring the bell and polish the sickle."
"Now, let's ring the bell and polish the sickle."
"Nonsense User," Misora-chan.
"Nonsense User," Takami-chan.
Please serve us with your life.
To those voices in unison,
I —
"As if I could do that!"
I fled with all my force.
With a full sprint, I ran away.
That meant abandoning Zukin-chan's body...
No, I shouldn't worry about that.
That was... already a corpse.
Just a physical object.
Don't be engulfed.
Don't be swallowed.

Anyway, more importantly, in this situation…… how could I survive? How could I dodge their attack? I just thought I'd be meeting Zukin-chan, so I had no weapons, not even the Jericho without any bullets — all I had was the *Unsigned* under my jacket, but I couldn't take these two on with such a small knife.

If they are one and the same… no, even if they are multiple people, I should search for a gap in their teamwork, if there is any. In that sense, even without the factor of them being fanatical, the Miotsukushi Sisters were painful for me.

I looked behind me while running.
Misora-chan,
and Takami-chan,
were following after me silently, expressionless.

To be exact, they kept,

a certain distance from me.

…….A certain distance?

Why won't they catch up to me?

That priest robe might not be fit for running, but, even then, the professional Miotsukushi Sisters should be able to close the distance with an amateur like me immediately. Even then, why...

I see.

They are trying to make me run a long distance and exhaust me.

To kill me easily.

Like hunting.

Too one-sidedly. It's not even a battle.

Not even tag, not even hide and seek.

Predators and prey.

Being eaten... cannibal?

"—Tch."

Me, who couldn't be eaten by Izumu-kun — even though I couldn't even be killed by Izumu-kun.

I won't let it go — like that.

A counterplan.

I need a counterplan.

"……..Shit, if I remember correctly—"

If I remember correctly, in this Imperial Garden...

I slowed down my pace a little.

Just enough to not be noticed.

And confirmed my surroundings.

This is bad.

I was running in the wrong direction.

I was running straight south, which was the opposite direction.

When I was able to see the Demizu square,

I abruptly turned ninety degrees.

No, I had too much momentum, so the angle ended up a bit acute.

I somehow held up my body, which was about to fall over,

and accelerated.

I stopping my breathing,

ten seconds,

Just for ten seconds —

faster than at full strength,

with a speed surpassing that of my full strength — I rushed.

Like an arrow that had been shot, I rushed.

Not going west, not going south, the Miotsukushi Sisters were dumbfounded by my lack of an attempt to exit the Imperial Garden. However,

obviously, I couldn’t lose them that easily.

Maintaining the exact fixed distance —

from the right and the left,

they came after me.

The pressure was tough.

Ten seconds weren't enough at all.

Izumu-kun had said some absurd things again.

In the first place, I was bad at sprinting.

Gugh……

It's no good, huh? Ten seconds……. is too much?

Distance.

The distance was...

……And.

When I became negligent with my footsteps, I tripped up.

I was about to fall forward.

I somehow managed to hold on,

however, that small mistake would not be overlooked.

"Kasa—"

"—Maji."

By the time I stood up, they’d already caught up.

The palm of Misora-chan's left hand.

The palm of Takami-chan's right hand.

Formed a cross on my back.

And.

"Kawaochi--"

"--------Kyouiki."

I was sent flying.

Without any time to think about aiki,

I flew in the air,

rolled on the ground,

and was blasted near the wall I could see before me.

Hitting my head strongly on the ditch.

"Gugh……..guah……."

I groaned.

My shoulders...

The area around my scapula hurt, as if it had vanished.

Unconsciously, I had to confirm whether my arms had been ripped off my body or not. It was completely different from Izumu-kun's *Eating One*, and it was also different from what Magokoro used on Moeta. It wasn't just a technique relying on strength — it was violence relying on skill.

As I thought, they were professionals.

I couldn't win against their methods.

Even running away was half-assed.

But —

"Pitiable."

"Pitiable."

"Weak."

"Weak."

In front of me, having somehow been able to raise my body from the ground, Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami were standing.

Without saying anything, symmetrically.

With their robes fluttering with the wind.

"I struggle to understand. I really can't understand why mister fox would choose someone like you as an enemy."

"I struggle to understand. I really can't understand why mister fox would choose someone like you as an enemy."

They said in turns.

They scorned me to confirm their self-worth.

Good grief, what simple personalities.

Fanatics are easy to understand.

Too easy to understand.

However, even then, there's no telling what they might do.

Therefore, I don't know what I should say.

".....Thinking about it, both of you ganging up on such a weak guy, isn't it somewhat cheap? Misora-chan, Takami-chan."

"Doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter."

"I only kill."

"I only kill."

Because we are professional killers — their voices synced.

So they are not battle crazies like Izumu-kun, huh.

Well, thinking about it, in Izumu-kun's case, calmness was wiseness. Everything deemed **crafty** was all left to Rizumu-chan, so his nature was to be expected. If you add up Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan's personalities, they skillfully and smoothly complete each other.

But that wasn't the case for these Miotsukushi Sisters.

If you add them up, you get double.

One plus one becomes two.

It was that simple.

Simple and clear, unmatched and accurate.

Their duty as *professional killers* wouldn't vanish.

Reason wouldn't get through to them.

This kind of provocation wouldn't work.

Then there was one more thing left to try — though it was an overdone card to play, I could bring up the fox-masked man and search a way to break through from here — but with two opponents, there was little meaning in that as well. Hampering faith has a low success rate if it’s not a one-on-one confrontation.

But.

I knew that from the very beginning.

My aim was — it was something else.

I,

only pretended to stand up,

and softly, quietly, seamlessly,

got over the ditch,

put my back to the wall —

"**It's useless to get closer to that wall**."

"**It's useless to get closer to that wall**."

— and.

Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami said.

I stopped moving.

I was stopped when I was still in the ditch.

I won't go back, but I won't move anymore either.

"I at least know this much — this much."

"I at least know this much — this much."

"If you get close to the Imperial Palace, an alarm rings."

"If you get close to the Imperial Palace, an alarm rings."

"I know this much."

"I know this much."

…..I was seen through.

The wall behind my back was the wall surrounding the Sentou palace.

I hadn't actually heard it ring, but if you carelessly get too close to that wall, a sensor gets activated and a seriously loud sound alarms the security — Nanananami told me that. I turned at the Demizu square aiming for that wall,

and I was read like an open book, huh.

"……But being read doesn't change anything. Even if you are known *professional killers* from the back world, physically speaking, I can get over that ditch and jump to that wall faster than you can catch me."

I told those two that.

My awareness still focused on that wall.

"Well, I don't know the details either, but — I can’t imagine there's any stupid rule like the alarm being deactivated at night. You girls don't want it to become a big affair either, do you? T**hat would bother mister fox**."

"……."

"……."

"If you say you retreat now, I won’t go after you. Of course, I fully

understand that your goal is my life, but — even then, there should be a point of compromise."

"None."

They answered instantly in sync.

And,

"It's useless."

"It's useless."

Without seeming to waver in the slightest.

"It's useless to ring the alarm. Nobody will come."

"It's useless to ring the alarm. Nobody will come."

".....? What are you saying? That's impossi—"

And.

Then, I noticed.

The Kyoto Imperial Garden.

Though it was night, there were too few people.

Rather than it being deserted, **there was no one at all**.

No one except for us.

Right, until now, I hadn't seen anyone.

No matter what, it was odd.

It wasn't even that late at night. Even though there was a university nearby, it was as if this Imperial Garden was in a different space than its surroundings...

Space!

Thirteen Stairs!

Space Creator — Ichirizuka Konomi!

"You're probably right."

"You're probably right."

The two — they laughed sadistically.

It was a crazed laugh.

I'm sure they were crazy.

No, they were normal like that.

Setting aside how they are as *professional killers*,

that was normal for the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Loyalty.

And fanaticism without loyalty.

But, even then, according to the information I got from Nureginu-san, Ichirizuka Konomi and the Miotsukushi Sisters should not be close. Rather, they should hate each other—

Was she here?

Nearby — was the Space Creator, Ichirizuka Konomi, here?

If she was — then even if the alarm sounded, it would certainly be useless. Needless to say, even Ichirizuka Konomi's *Space Creation* wasn't a kind of supernatural power, so if enough time passed, someone would hear the alarm and rush over here. But, there was no doubt that it would take some time.

Impossible.

Impossible. I didn't think that *Space Creator* could be used in such an extensive and open zone. I concluded on my own that it could only be used in closed space like a train or a school, however, if that wasn't the case, Misora-chan and Takami-chan wouldn't be able to hold Zukin-chan's upper body out in the open. But, if that kind of thing was possible, then anything was.

"Ko-Konomi — but why?"

I pulled my attention from the wall.

My body fell to the ground.

I fell in a sitting pose on the ditch.

It wasn’t that I wanted to sit.

The price of the ten seconds.

My legs wouldn't support me anymore.

My last bit of willpower —

my final hope went extinct.

"Why — setting you girls aside, Ichirizuka Konomi should be totally obedient to mister fox — there's no way she would disobey him like that."

"You talk as if you know, Nonsense User."

"You talk as if you know, Nonsense User."

"Despite not knowing anything."

"Despite not knowing anything."

Despite not knowing anything about mister fox.

They said, their voices united.

I had trouble understanding what they meant.

What? That way of saying it.

From the way they said it…… it's as if their actions, as if their violation of the order to not lay a hand on me, was itself an order from the fox-masked man's will.

There was no way.

That person stopped fighting me.

The battle with that person should have ended.

Or maybe it hadn't ended?

It wasn't really over?

That... was just a lie?

No……. that was probably not the case.

Based on how he spoke at first and how things had gone since then, there was no doubt that these two weren't respecting the fox-masked man's orders — looking at the last half-month, the fox-masked man really stopped fighting me.

Saitou Takashi really admitted his loss.

He was a man who could recognize his loss.

As one would expect from Humanity's Worst.

There was no way that was a lie.

At this point, that was certain.

Even in a situation like that, it was certain.

That's why —

In this case, the enigma was Ichirizuka Konomi.

Her actions.

The woman who should have been obedient to Saitou Takashi.

However — was that not all?

Was she… planning something?

Then what…….

What was she planning?

What exactly happened?

"Now," said Misora-chan.

"Now," said Takami-chan.

"We can't demand the impossible from Ichirizuka — although it is abrupt and silly, let's put an end to it now."

"We can't demand the impossible from Ichirizuka — although it is abrupt and silly, let's put an end to it now."

Ichirizuka Konomi.

Miotsukushi Misora.

Miotsukushi Takami.

It's no good. I don't have time to organize my thoughts — if I thought a little more, I feel that I might have an epiphany, but in this situation — I don't have the leeway to get to that point.

Just… being killed.

Just being played with like a toy.

Like what happened to Zukin-chan.

Tortured and trampled — just like that.

That way — that kind of thing.

That kind of thing — that cruelly.

Just when I was finally able...

Just when I was able to return to peace, to ordinary life.

Miiko-san and Houko-chan,

and Magokoro.

and Kunagisa Tomo —

".....Hey."

I said.

In an offhand way.

"If you're going to kill me no matter what, just tell me one thing. I have one regret. I just want to know one thing."

"You can't." Misora-chan answered coldly.

"You can't." Takami-chan answered coldly.

"Don't say that. It has to do with mister fox."

When I said that, the two went silent.

They stayed silent, staring at me.

There was no affirmative answer, but I was at the very least allowed one question for the remainder of my life.

After breathing in once,

"Aikawa Jun."

I said.

"Aikawa-san — what happened to her?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean?"

"I won't ask for details, I won't ask to be told that much. But I want you to at least tell me this: is Aikawa-san alive? Or — is she dead?"

Was she alive and not coming back?

Or was she not coming back because she was no longer alive?

I wanted to know that.

That was the only thing I wanted to know.

The Miotsukushi Sisters, in unison,

"She is alive."

Answered.

She is alive.

Hearing that, I was relieved.

I see.

Then, it's fine.

As long as she’s alive, it’s fine.

At the very end, I thought that.

No matter what she thought of her dad,

no matter what situation the fox-masked man was in —

I didn't mind.

I shut my mouth.

I didn’t intend to say anything more.

I didn’t intend to close my eyes.

Facing me, the two of them frowned in unison.

"I don't like it."

"I don't like it."

"I don't like it at all."

"I don't like it at all."

The two of them readily got in a stance.

Symmetrically — with a line of symmetry.

"I changed my mind. Not for mister fox's sake — I will kill you for my sake and by my will."

"I changed my mind. Not for mister fox's sake — I will kill you for my sake and by my will."

With a silent but certain intent to kill,
Miotsukushi Misora,
Miotsukushi Takami,
the two professional killers moved at the same time.
Die on both sides at the same time — with their voices synched.
"Iezakura-------"
"-------Hagataki."
"Taiin----------"
"----Shibaguruma."
"Eriita-----!"
"----Deigan!"
I didn't close my eyes.
I didn't even blink.
But I couldn't see anything.
Their movements didn't register in my eyes.
Only that result appeared.
In front of me, only the result was left.

"—What a masterpiece."

A face tattoo.
A boy with a face tattoo stood in front of me.
Turning his back to the Miotsukushi Sisters.
Catching Misora-chan's right hand with his left.
Catching Takami-chan's left hand with his right.
Facing me.
He was certainly there.
".....You're late, idiot."
"My bad, my bad — I was checking whether my DVD recorder's time was properly set up and it became this late."
"Have you been doing well?"
"Better than you."
"That's the most important."
"Kahahah."
The boy with the face tattoo laughed pleasantly.
"Gugh—"

"Gugh—"

Misora-chan, whose arm was fixed in place, glared with all her strength at the boy showing her his back.

Takami-chan, whose arm was fixed in place, glared with all her strength at the boy showing her his back.

And, for the first time, their voices got rough.

Removing the mask of tranquility, they raised their voices in a scream.

"Who are you — bastard!"

"Who are you — bastard!"

"Who are you yourselves with that stereo broadcast? I'm taken aback. What, are you this temple's nuns?" Even now, the boy with the face tattoo hadn't turned around. "Before asking who I am, you should first name yourself."

"Seventh step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Miotsukushi Misora!"

"Eighth step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Miotsukushi Takami!"

"By the way the Imperial Palace isn't a temple. It's the remains of the imperial residence."

I said to the boy with the face tattoo.

"Don't carelessly say things without even knowing, Zerozaki—"

"Hitoshiki!"

On the opposite side of where she was caught, Misora-chan's left arm, on the opposite side of where she was caught, Takami-chan's right arm — when they lunged them towards him at the same time, still without looking at them, in a circle, using their arms respectively as an axis, as if doing a back hip circle, he did a backflip and landed behind the Miotsukushi Sisters.

"That's my name."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki said so.

Similar to a military uniform from the great war, buttons glowing from top to bottom.

Black security boots and black driver gloves.

With the front of his jacket left open, a red shirt peeked from below.

Something like a scarf was tied around his arm.

His hair, previously tied together, was flowing freely.

It might have been a bit shorter now.

And,

after removing his stylishly designed glasses.

Eyes.

Pupils.

Deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep,

deep to no end,

deep eyes that seemed to have darkness etched in them.

Deeply sinful pupils that seemed to have conquered gods.

"Kahahah—"

Zerozaki put the glasses he removed,

inside the pocket of his jacket.

"It's been a long time, observer. I never wanted to see you again."

"How nostalgic, demonic killer. Since the moment we parted, there was not a day where I didn't forget you."

We exchanged a greeting for our reunion.

"Good grief. No, no, really, the way you're on the verge of death for all my entrance scenes, I'm so thankful it makes me wanna cry."

"Right, right, it's a lot of trouble for me if I don't prep the stage for the minor characters with barely any screen time. So I'd appreciate it if you didn't laugh so much and thanked me more sincerely. What's that, winter clothing? Long pants don't suit you, really. And wearing all black, too. I feel hot just looking at you, you know."

"I can't argue with that. What's up with this region? October's almost over and the temperature's still like this. Someone willingly living in a place with such irregular seasons must have a loose screw in their head."

"I wholeheartedly agree. The only one more crazy than someone living in a place like this would probably be a short guy who kills people in cold blood."

"Aah, but short guys who kill people in cold blood often turn out to be cool and fantastic. It's one of the world's great mysteries. Unlike guys who don't hesitate to fool people; people like that are often lame and uncool."

"Exactly. This world is so unfair. After all, someone nice like me, who lies for the sake of other people, ended up in such a horrible situation. I'll be frank; no matter how you think about it, the reason I got into such a horrible situation is because a certain prowler showed up."

"I see. Similar to how my life got even more absurd after I met a certain Nonsense User? That must be tough. I reaaally understand that hardship, I sympathize from the bottom of my heart."

"Oh please, stop that. Thinking about someone like you sympathizing with me makes me inadvertently want to kill myself."

"If you wanna do it, I'll give you a hand, free of charge — I was just thinking about how I wanted you dead, what a coincidence."

"Hoh, we must have a lot in common. I've also been constantly thinking for a long time now about how happy I'd be if you were to die."

"Well, we gotta leave the fun for the end."

"Exactly."

Zerozaki laughed.

I didn't laugh.

"Wh-what are you guys?"

Miotsukushi Sisters yelled with their voices in unison.

Zerozaki and I, with our voices in sync, answered.

"Good friends."

Zerozaki —

he released a powerful kick aiming for Misora-chan's temporal region. Because of how wide the motion was, I'd thought there was no way Misora-chan wouldn't avoid it, but when she did, the same leg returned from the opposite direction.

"Gugh—!"

Although she somehow managed to guard with her arms,

Misora-chan collapsed on the ground.

When Zerozaki tried to follow up after this,

"-----Iunaraku."

Takami-chan attacked his back.

Without mercy, without an ounce of doubt.

She swung her arm from behind him.

"----Nakaganna!"

"Mm? Are you perhaps professional killers?"

Zerozaki jumped over Misora-chan, who was laying on the ground, and by doing so, dodged the attack coming from his back. Naturally, when leaping, he didn't forget to step on Misora-chan's stomach.

Hooh…….

I'd thought he was just a knife expert, but Zerozaki Hitoshiki, the demonic killer, seemed to also be good at martial arts.

"Hey, defective product."

"What is it, human failure?"

"I don't understand the situation. If you have free time, explain."

"These girls are professional killers and are trying to kill me."

"I see. Allies of justice, huh."

"An evil character like you is a perfect fit for their opponent, right?"

"You say such cruel things when I disguise myself as Santa on Christmas to distribute presents to unfortunate children. What are their names?"

"So you weren't listening, even after telling them to name themselves. What a horrible guy. Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami. From a branch family of the Niounomiya Troupe of Massacre Magic."

"I see. So they're small fries."

Zerozaki said "I got the situation." and switched into a stance.

With his legs parted widely, one in front and one behind him, it was a kung fu stance.

Misora-chan had already stood up,

and stood on the other side of Takami-chan's symmetry line.

"How—"

"How—"

The two of them asked Zerozaki in turns.

"How were you able to enter? This space — it's currently structured so that it cannot be entered or left by anyone but us."

"How were you able to enter? This space — it's currently

structured so that it cannot be entered or left by anyone but us."

"Heeh, what, so there's a barrier? But unfortunately, barriers don't work on me. I overcame that a few months ago."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki said, casually.

As usual, he still had a smile on his face.

"Then, Zerozaki —"

Since Misora-chan and Takami-chan said nothing, I was the one to ask Zerozaki this time.

"**Not how**, but **why here**? How were you able to know that I was in this situation, in a place like this?"

"I asked someone."

"Kouta-san?"

"Kouta? Aah, that braids and denim girl. She's an ill-natured and unpleasant woman. I was careless and just about to fall in love with her. But well, not her. I met that thief quite a while ago."

"Then who? Who did you ask?"

"A woman wearing a coat."

Coat…….?

Ah, maybe Emoto-san?

Thinking that, I looked at Misora-chan and Takami-chan,

"That traitor—"

"That traitor—"

And they gritted their teeth harshly.

Then, it was Emoto-san.

Step.

Step step.

Step step step.

The Miotsukushi Sister's steps echoed on the ground.

Aiming at Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

They glared vigorously.

Misora-chan and Takami-chan joined the *Thirteen Stairs* relatively late, but they should have heard from the fox-masked man that he'd chosen me as his enemy in Zerozaki Hitoshiki's stead. Then, although they hadn't put it into words, they must have their own thoughts on him. At the very least, since they'd put their faith in the fox-masked

man, they couldn't ignore Zerozaki completely.

Zerozaki was able to block their last attack, but now that they understood he was not an opponent they could underestimate, the two should come at Zerozaki with their full force.

They should be trying to kill Zerozaki.

"....By the way, Zerozaki. What about your knives?"

"Aah. I currently don't have any."

"Don't have any? You?"

"There were some circumstances. I ended up using them all. Thanks to that, my body feels really light, though."

".....Is that so. That's splendid."

I took *Unsigned* out from the holster of my jacket and threw it with spin towards Zerozaki.

Being accustomed to it, Zerozaki easily gripped the knife with his right, knife-holding hand.

"What's that?"

"Something I received recently, but I'm just holding on to it now — no, it's a memento."

I said.

"Use it."

"Sankyuu."

"But don't kill them."

"Hoh. Don't kill them?"

Zerozaki,

with *Unsigned*, which must just look like a small knife to an outsider, in his right hand, he shifted his pose, lowered his upper half and moved closer to the Miotsukushi Sisters.

"I wonder who he’s talking to, that observer. I swear, he doesn't understand what kind of guy this human failure is. I'm a virtuous man who has never ever killed someone before, you know?"

"Just like I’m a virtuous man who has never fooled anyone even once?"

"Exactly."

"Both of us just can’t do wrong, really."

"I swear. We're too good, at our roots."

Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami moved —

Zerozaki Hitoshiki also moved.

They crossed at the middle point.

"Kaii-------"

"---Awaame."

"Waija-----"

"----Seiitsu."

Not just their hands — the sisters also attacked with their legs.

Their clothes were loose enough, and it didn't make it easy for them to move, but on the other hand, it also made it harder to read their moves. And in fact, Zerozaki was so busy dodging or redirecting the repeated attacks of the Miotsukushi Sisters that he had no time to attack with the weapon he'd finally acquired.

The girls,

Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami didn't scatter.

They continued to be aligned.

They attacked on both sides at the same time, without being even a particle off.

If they are so thorough it's even more of a pain than if they were scattered.

As I thought, it's hard to fight multiple opponents at the same time.

It's not just because there are twice the amount of hands. The biggest problem is **that the range where attacks can come from becomes wider** — you can't focus your defense on a single point! You can't focus, which equals in a lack of concentration—

"Yasagama-----"

"--------Kuina."

"Inatsu------"

"-----Benkou."

Zerozaki, as if he couldn't endure the fierce attacks of Misora-chan and Takami-chan, collapsed backwards. No, collapsed isn't right; I guess slipped would be accurate in this case. Certainly, this place, filled with little rocks, wasn't suited for action, but that's the same either way.

But.

Even then, Zerozaki was smiling.

"Oh my, oops!"

When he fell, he used his hip as a support, and using his legs as a scythe, he mowed down at Misora-chan and Takami-chan's ankles.

Not expecting a counterattack directly after collapsing, the two fell onto Zerozaki.

Of course, they should have been able to hold themselves up after that.

But these two didn't.

The two professional killers didn't do so.

Rather,

like that, directly down,

they fell — fell on Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

A follow up, they wanted to finish him. Their right and left hands,

got in position,

"Raori-----"

"----Eougi."

"Tauzura-----"

"------Jakago."

"Yaata------!"

"----Dagoku!"

Without being able to grasp the timing to stand up, seeing their palms accelerating without any hesitation, as if they threw they bodies away, like they weren't thinking about the consequences, like falling from a ceiling--

Zerozaki stopped the blows from the front.

Temporarily leaving *Unsigned* on the ground---

Misora-chan's hand,

Takami-chan's hand,

He caught each of them, entangling their fingers together.

"....."

"....."

The shock of the attack — it wasn't transmitted.

All I could see was him simply catching the blow.

Zerozaki grinned,

"You know, it's my first time holding hands with girls."

Making this humorous statement,

he pulled their arms down and struck them to the ground.

With the recoil, he raised himself.

With their hands still connected.

"What's the saying; a flower in each hand? But sorry. You girls are too short. If you want to go out with me, you should be at least over one hundred and seventy centimeters."

"Ba-bastard—"

"Ba-bastard—"

"Stop there."

Zerozaki finally released their hands — step, step, step, hopping on one foot, he moved back three steps.

"Having two of your special attacks blocked and still coming at me is just foolishness. At your level, you should be able to get it just from that exchange. You can't win against me. **You're a hundred years too early**—"

That...

That should have been Aikawa-san's line.

Zerozaki continued boldly.

"The only people I wanted to kill but haven't been able to are Humanity's Strongest and the Nonsense User. Now, try to draw your own conclusions from that. **What'll happen to you**, Miotsukushi Misora, Miotsukushi Takami, professional killer ladies? Do you have enough confidence, reasons, grounds to believe that you won't die by my hand — after that exchange, do you have any of that left?"

"....."

"....."

"It's no good, Zerozaki." Still without fully standing up, but with my upper half raised, I said in the stead of the Miotsukushi Sisters silently glaring at Zerozaki. "These girls are fanatics — they really aren't afraid of dying as martyrs."

"I see. So they're not afraid of dying, huh."

Zerozaki said.

"But you are afraid of me, right?"

"....."

"....."

"Be at ease, be at ease, my cute cute professional killers — if you're scared of me, I don't mind letting you go. Disappear wherever you want. If you want to run away, I won't move one step. I won't even speak. I probably won't even follow you with my eyes. Of course, if you head towards me, it's a different story. Be it righteous self-defense or excessive self-defense, even if that Nonsense User tries to stop me, I will, without restraint—"

Zerozaki

stuck out his red tongue,

Looked at the two in priest robes, as if eating them.

" —chop you up and line the pieces for public viewing."

Misora-chan and

Takami-chan

stood up with a jump,

and greatly distanced themselves from Zerozaki.

"Next time — it won't end like this."

"Next time — it won't end like this."

Kill.

We will kill you without a fail.

We will kill you twice at the same time from both sides.

Saying that, the two of them turned on their heels.

And faded into the darkness of the Kyoto night.

As I'd thought, they didn't possess half-assed legs.

They got out of our sight in a moment.

"Kahahah — what a masterpiece."

Zerozaki said, watching the pair's backs for much longer than me.

"Certainly, as you said, they probably didn't fear being martyrs but, they were raised as *professional killers*. Achieving their objective is their end goal. Their objective wasn't really to kill me, right? If it was to kill you, they'd choose to escape here."

".....Then you should have captured them."

"You were the one who said not to kill them, weren't you?"

"When I say not to kill them, it obviously means capture them alive, tie them with rope and offer them to me. You can't even understand that much?"

"My bad. I thought ‘don’t kill them’ means letting them breathe. Kahahah, I still haven't gotten over my jetlag."

".....Were you abroad?"

"I thought I told you. Don't you remember? What a horrible memory you got, defective product." Zerozaki picked up *Unsigned* from where he left it on the ground, approached me and handed it to me. "Now, what’ll we do?"

"Let me see…… If you ask me that, I have to think about it," I took the knife and put it back in the holster. "……..I wonder."

Zukin-chan's corpse — it was near the aphananthe tree.

But, that's not something for me to interfere with. She should be cleaned somewhere I have no influence. The reason why Zukin-chan and the eleventh Furuyari Zukin wanted *Unsigned*, is still unclear, but since Zukin-chan is dead, that's trivial to me.

What’s not trivial is Zukin-chan herself, though.

More importantly, what I should be thinking about……

Errr……. since the Miotsukushi Sisters had left there would be no point to staying by herself, so Ichirizuka Konomi should also have left the Imperial Garden.

For starters.

Let's say we were able to avoid an emergency situation.

The danger was over.

But……. what in the world was that?

The fox-masked man should have left me alone, so why were three of the *Thirteen Stairs*, who should have been the fox-masked man's limbs, trying to kill me?

Setting aside the Miotsukushi Sisters, Ichirizuka Konomi.

If the Miotsukushi Sisters had been acting alone, the problem would have just been the fox-masked man's high charisma and lack of authority, but since Ichirizuka Konomi was involved, the story was different. Conversely, if Ichirizuka Konomi had been aiming at me on her own, I would have guessed it was due to the fox-masked man’s

will, but judging by the Miotsukushi Sisters' words, that shouldn't have been the case.

Anyway……

So it was still not over, huh.

It was still…… continuing?

"Here."

"Yeah."

I grabbed Zerozaki's hand and stood up.

My breathing recovered enough that I could walk.

Though my shoulder still hurt, it didn't seem to be broken or dislocated. I was struck from behind while running, so it shouldn't have been that different from having jumped. I minimized the shock.

However, that was the minimum……..?

Thinking about that, Zerozaki might have actually been amazing, easily catching the Miotsukushi Sisters' full power attacks.

I wonder who was stronger, between him and Izumu-kun……..

Ah, right.

"Hey, Zerozaki. Do you know Niounomiya Izumu?"

"Mm. Aah, I know him, why? It's that guy with beautiful long hair, straitjacket and split personality, right?"

"Not just by name. Have you met him?"

"Yeah. I don't know the *little sister*, but a few years ago I met the *big brother*. Rather... well, it's a long and absurd story. So what about it?"

"No……."

As I thought, they knew each other.

I wondered what their relationship was.

But before I could ask, Zerozaki,

"What's up with Niounomiya?"

He asked.

It seems he was curious why I knew that name. Certainly, Hime-chan also hadn't disclosed a lot of information about Niounomiya…..

"Well…… both of us have a lot of things we want to ask….. and other stuff to catch up on….. So, for now, let's move. Come to the apartment. Let's talk leisurely."

Since then, what had he been doing?

The story of the Zerozaki clan being annihilated…….

And how it was in Houston.

And about Kouta-san……

And more importantly,

the connection between Zerozaki Hitoshiki and the fox-masked man —

there should have been a connection.

I'd thought it would no longer be useful, but now that it had come to this...

"Aah, I'll ask just in case, but Zerozaki, do you happen to hate people from the *Yamiguchi* house?"

"No, not really?"

"Do you like little girls or little sisters?"

"What are you talking about?"

"No, it's fine if you don't hate them."

Niounomiya really hated *Yamiguchi*, but at the very least, the individual Zerozaki Hitoshiki didn't appear to hold that kind of animosity. Then it should have been fine to let him meet Houko-chan. Though I don't know how Houko-chan might react…… I've heard that the Zerozaki Clan was pretty detested…….

"By the way, that onee-chan, is she still around?"

"Um?"

"That cool onee-chan with straight black hair."

"Straight…… No, aah, Miiko-san?"

So she had her hair down when she met Zerozaki.

They should have met in my room.

"Yeah, she's living there. Why?"

"If we're going to the apartment, let me see that onee-chan first. I headed back to Kyoto to see her more than you."

"Shut up. Don't touch her, she's mine."

"What? Is that so?"

"It is."

Though I was rejected.

Well, this was this, that was that.

Don't mix them together.

With me on the left and Zerozaki on the right, we started walking, aiming for the Imperial Garden's Nakadachiuri gate, though not in symmetry. Going straight west from there, we should have arrived close to the apartment.

"That reminds me — where did you meet Emoto-san?"

"What?"

"Emoto-san. The person with the coat."

"Aah. Her, so her name's Emoto. Emoto, Emoto, Emoto, huh — Mm? Emoto? Is she related to the girl from May?"

"No, the character is different. Just a coincidence. I'll be damned if destiny had anything to do with it."

"Hmm. I don't really get it. Well, I met her in front of your apartment."

"Um?"

"I went to the apartment thinking I could see you, and she told me where you were, so I ran like Melos and rushed over to your side."

"I hate that story….. Selinuntius, who originally had nothing to do with it, went through the most hardships."

"Don't read it so shallowly. If Melos were in the same situation, Selinuntius would have done the same. They both understood that. Each were like a part of the other. Isn't that what friendship is?"

"Maybe. But I hate it. The only thing that should be appreciated from that story is that Melos was a siscon."

"I'm sure the story was definitely not about that……."

But,

why was Emoto-san in front of my apartment? Was she trying to tell me about the situation but realized that I'd already departed? But if that was the case, she'd have told Houko-chan or Magokoro, who she'd met before…… Why a stranger like Zerozaki?

Well, anyway, what matters is that Emoto-san is safe — I guess I should think that. No, I can't really be at ease yet. I'm worried about everyone from the apartment…… We need to return quickly. In retrospect, not having lifted the defense from the Kunagisa Syndicate was a good move……

"But Zerozaki, I'm impressed you managed to talk to Emoto-san. That person doesn't seem capable of talking normally to someone she's meeting for the first time…… In the first place, it's impressive you were able to hear what she had to say."

"Why? She certainly wore some strange clothes, but her way of talking was direct. Pretty normal, you know."

"Direct? Normal? That's a joke, right? Why would you lie to me like that? It took me a while to finally be able to talk normally to her. She immediately starts crying whenever you say something, after all."

"Cry?"

"Did she not cry?"

"There's no way an adult would cry that easily."

"Um?"

"Um?"

Huh?

Are we... not on the same wavelength?

"……..Hey, Zerozaki. The person you met in front of my apartment, was she a beautiful woman wearing a raincoat and long boots?"

"A raincoat and long boots?"

"Or maybe a white coat and a swimsuit?"

"…….If I saw someone like that, I'd run away in two seconds."

Zerozaki answered, looking creeped out.

That expression was pretty intense.

It seems… I was wrong.

"Then…… who was that? A strange woman—"

"I said a strange woman, not a pervert. The woman I saw had a coat and, ah."

When we turned around the Nakadachiuri gate

Zerozaki raised his voice.

And, pointed forward.

"That person over there."

"Mm?"

"That person over there. The one I'm talking about."

Looking at her,

hearing that, looking at her.

Leaning against the gate's pillar,

there was a woman.

A trenchcoat with long hems.

Under that, a thin skirt and a light grey turtleneck summer sweater.

Stockings and white pumps.

A brand name handbag.

Only her coat stood out.

The woman,

with her long slit eyes, noticed Zerozaki and me.

Fixing us

with her clear cut,

and resolute expression.

Her eyes looked like they'd never reflected anything, as if she could see through everything.

Her red lips, from which her canines protruded, moved bewitchingly.

"Fourth step of *Thirteen Stairs* — Utage Kudan."

She talked in a very bored tone, as if she had experienced hell and tragedy and sin and despair and chaos and submission, all at the same time — as if declaring the triviality of the world.

"U-Utage, Ku..."

"That being said, I'm currently not talking as a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*, but as a close friend of *Dead Blue (The Verge of Death)* — ancient member of *Legion*, *Trigger Happy End (Corpse)* Shigai Touno."

".....!"

Shigai Touno — ancient *Legion*!

Cluster, Mate, Russel, Inside —

Team!

*Ku*nagisa — *Ku*dan! (TL : Kunagisa's 'ku' uses an ancient kanji of the number nine while Kudan's 'ku' uses the current kanji)

Utage Kudan — Shigai Touno!

They were the same person!

Then I made Kunagisa call someone under the fox-masked man's control, one of the fox-masked man's limbs, just to protect myself?!

"Don't make a face like that, you can relax. Between mister fox and *Blue* (Verge), I am more loyal to *Blue*. I have betrayed mister fox about five thousand and forty times, but I haven't betrayed *Blue* even once."

"F-five…….?"

"It's also the factorial of seven."

With a straight face, Utage-san — no, Touno-san?

Having two names — it was better than Noise, but it was still hard for me to deal with……

"What's up with her?" Zerozaki asked as if he didn't really understand. "Is she your enemy? Can I kill her?"

"N-no…… you can't kill her—"

Naturally, I didn't understand it very well either.

No,

I didn't get it at all.

"So, I don't know if you're Touno-san or Kudan-san, but w-why are you here—"

"To betray *Blue* — no, Kunagisa Tomo."

Taking out a tobacco box from her coat pocket.

It was a brand with low tar.

Holding it in her mouth, she lit it with her zippo.

"I didn't tell mister fox, but I heard an awful lot about you from *Cheetah* and *Green Green Green*, and of course, from *Blue* herself too. It's truly pleasant. Us *Legion*, with all eight of us — we can finally be alternatives for you alone."

No — spouting smoke, Touno-san corrected herself.

"Not even the eight of us are enough."

"....."

"In the end, all we *Legion* ever did was rebaking and buffoonery, nothing more than copy and pasting what you did to the Kunagisa Syndicate six years ago — I wish it was at least cut and paste."

Not self-deprecatingly.

Not blaming me.

Just pallidly.

Like nonsense.

And... facing me.

"Nonsense User. Do you like cars?"

".....I like things like Fiats, but I don’t especially care about automobiles in general."

"Then I’ll change my question. What would happen if you suddenly activated a motor which hadn't been maintained for over ten years, which had rusted and which only had value as an antique?"

"That—”

I didn't understand what she wanted to say.

I took one step on the side.

I removed myself from the line between Zerozaki and Touno-san.

" —there's no such thing."

"Ah, that so? So there's none."

"But I know what would happen. It would just burn in no time and break apart."

"Absolutely?"

"There's no need to test it."

I said.

"What are you trying to say? And first, what did you mean earlier by betraying Kunagisa?"

"Mean, huh — there's no meaning. Just take it literally. I'm not like Utsurigi, and obviously not like you. I don’t search for meaning in words and concepts. I'm always literal in what I say, I don’t care for meaning or depth. Betraying Kunagisa Tomo means going against *Blue*'s will……. disobeying *Blue*'s orders, that's all. *Trigger Happy End* will be, from the bottom of her heart, without hesitation — infidel to *Dead Blue*. I’ve already lied to *Blue* and fooled *Blue* plenty of times, but this is my first time betraying her."

"The first time—"

"Kunagisa Tomo is done for."

Touno

took out a pair of glasses from the same pocket as the tobacco box and calmly put it on.

I couldn't see her eyes.

Her eyes were no longer visible.

"Do-done for? Done for, what do you—"

I didn't understand.

I didn't understand what she was saying.

As if scorning me from the bottom of her heart,

to that incompetent me,

to me, who was happier not knowing anything, Touno-san said.

There's nothing that can be done — it cannot be helped,

she declared that to me.

From Touno-san's eyes,

a single tear spilled.

Touno-san was betraying Kunagisa.

Betraying Kunagisa Tomo for Kunagisa Tomo's sake.

"You're to blame, Nonsense User. You're at fault, you're at fault. It's your responsibility, you're the only one to blame. Since who-knows-when, you ceased being stopped and started changing on your own, so Kunagisa Tomo, too, couldn't afford continuing to halt. She had no choice — no choice but to grow."

Ii-chan never changes.

Ii-chan never changes, forever.

"Th-that's — that's, why—"

"There's no way a body that's been stopped for ten years can handle growth at this point. You should have understood if you'd thought about it. Kunagisa was very careful to not give it away to you, but the people from the Syndicate and the old members from *Legion*, everyone but you know about it. While you were getting all fired up about your purpose of being mister fox's opponent, while you were out fighting alone, everyone except you already finished saying their goodbyes. Kunagisa Tomo—

Could die at any moment."

"Halloween" is the END.

In reality, the home of the subway Tozai line, the Kyoto public office station, is made so that people absolutely cannot fall on the rails, but what I thought upon seeing that was "why isn't every station in Japan made like this"? Even though, if they did that, there wouldn't be any more cases of people dying after being hit by trains, stations like the Kyoto public office station are extremely minor and, in the last twelve and odd years, I've only seen three other spots like that. Of course, the answer to that is obvious; the cost of doing that (labour, time and money) currently cannot be financed with enough leeway. To put it plainly, even if there exists a best decision, if it's a decision that can't physically be put into action, then it's no longer the best. Well, it's that kind of story. For example, if we used current scientific knowledge, we could easily make a flying car, but that would have an absurdly high cost and driving it would be incomparable to driving on land, so we'd need to create a special driving license; at that point, we shouldn't develop one at all. It's similar to a conclusion like that. For armchair theories or things requiring some sort of sacrifice, it's not because we can do them that we should. But if you think really hard about it, airplanes have tires attached, so aren't they technically flying cars? Or something. Well, when I sit on a bench in the Kyoto public office station, I always end up thinking that.

This work is the sequel to *Uprooted Radical (Part One): The Thirteen Stairs*, the second and middle book of the arc. If you were to compare Part One as rushing from right to left, this work would be a story spinning its own wheels, going in circles. Everyone has times when things don't go as planned, when the story doesn't progress in a convenient way. Just like that, allies and enemies are both toyed with, all the same. If you want everyone to cooperate, you'll end up dragged down as much as you are helped by others. But, in the end, thinking that you are the only one being relied upon is the worst thing to do — if they knew that from the start, maybe people could be a bit more kind. It will soon be time to put an end to the Nonsense User, who is

the embodiment of running in circles. Therefore, it will end after the CM. If you've read this far, I would like for you to read the last entry of the Zaregoto Series, *Uprooted Radical (Part Three): The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User*.

In putting this book out to the world, the only role I had was writing the text and nothing else. At the very least, I think that I was able to come this far thanks to the numerous people of the editing, publishing, and sales department. I am deeply and sincerely thankful to my editor in-charge Oota Katsushi-sama and illustrator in-charge Take-san first and foremost, and also to everyone who supported the Zaregoto Series.

Nisio Isin

Notes

[←1]

TL: kind and excelling are just two different readings of the same kanji

[←2]

TL: Both "Aimless Equation" and "unconscious" are pronounced MUISHIKI.